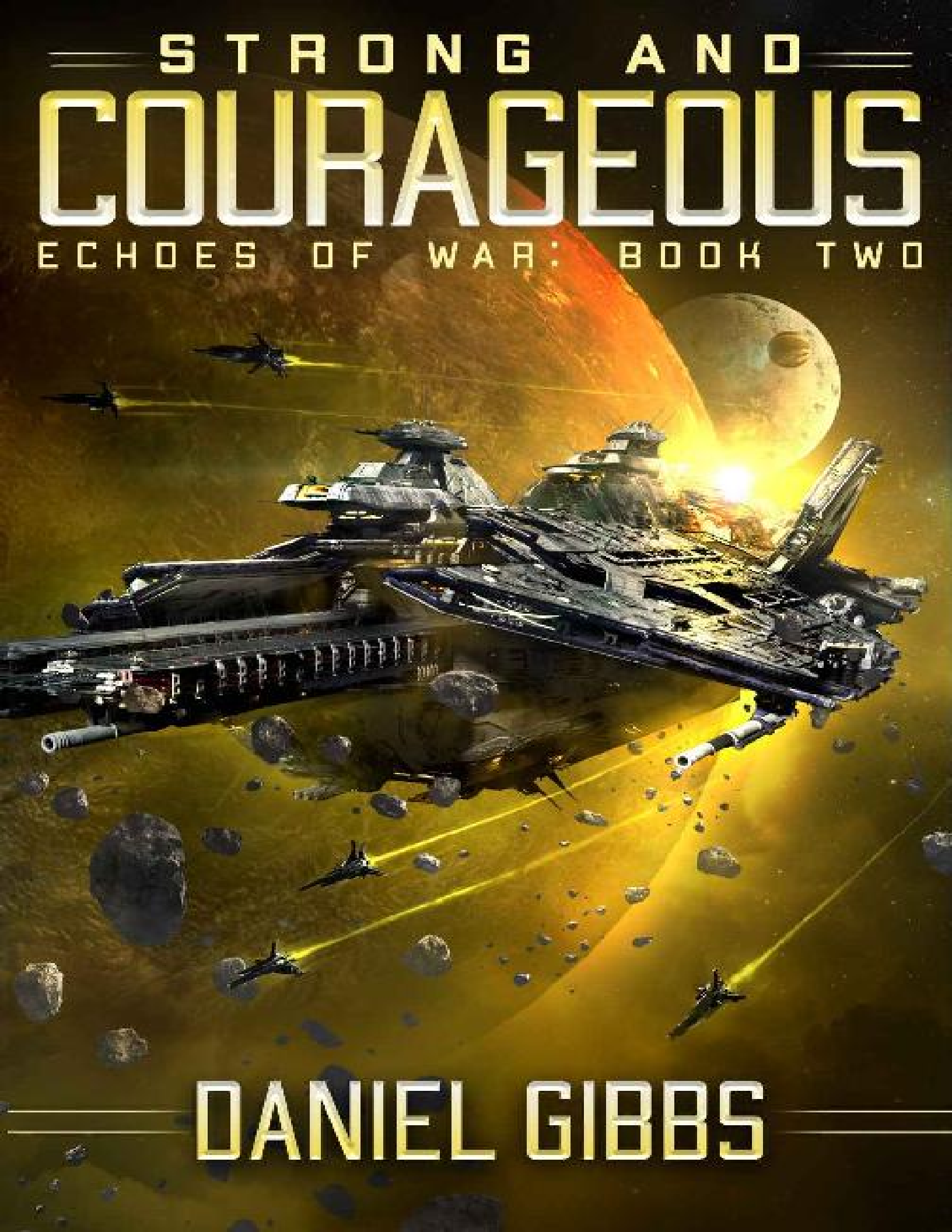
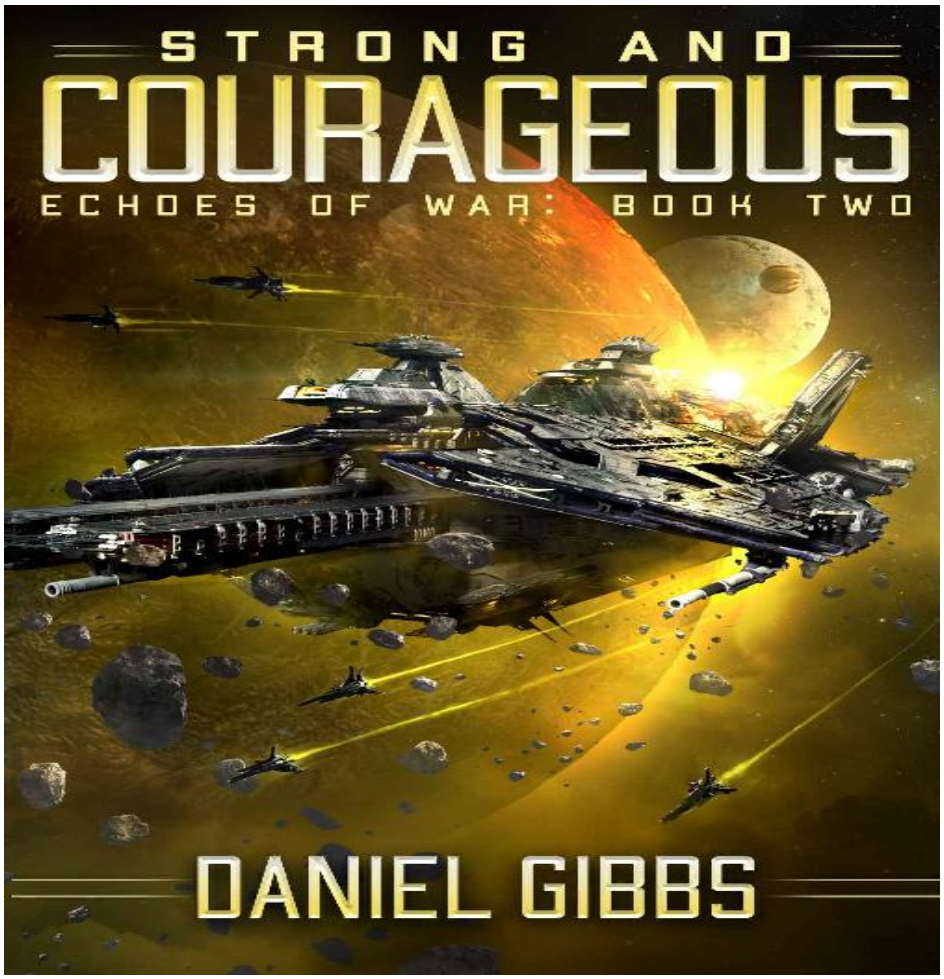
STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

ECHOES OF WAR: BOOK TWO



DANIEL GIBBS


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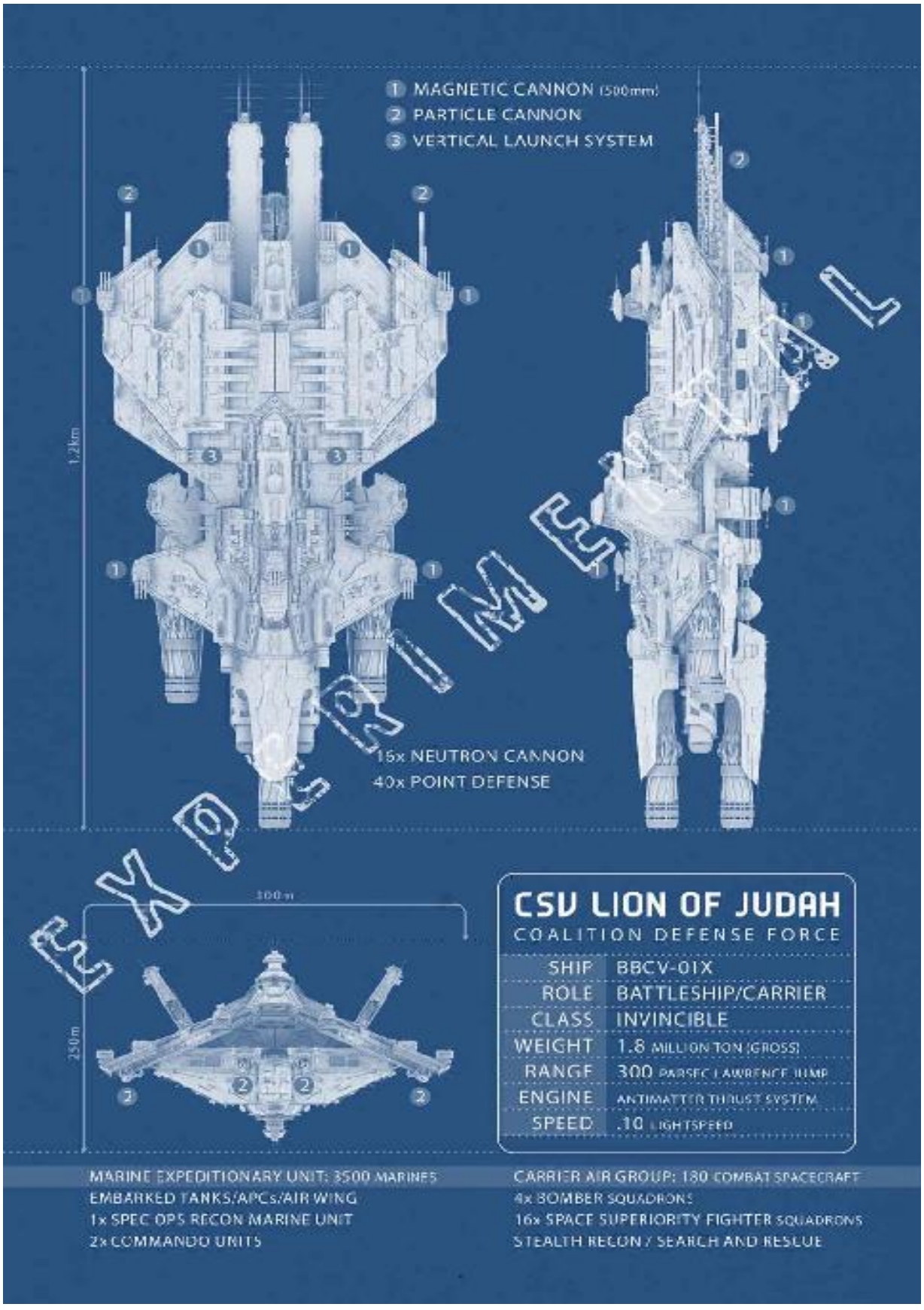
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CSV LION OF JUDAH

COALITION DEFENSE FORCE

SHIP	BBCV-01X
ROLE	BATTLESHIP/CARRIER
CLASS	INVINCIBLE
WEIGHT	1.8 MILLION TON (GROSS)
RANGE	300 PARSEC LAWRENCE JUMP
ENGINE	ANTIMATTER THRUST SYSTEM
SPEED	.10 LIGHTSPEED

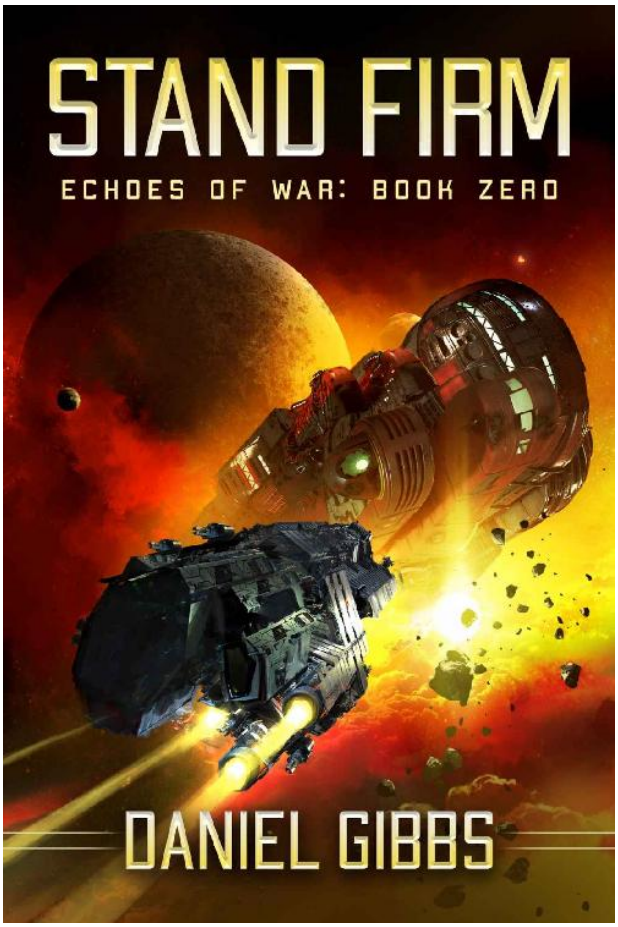
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1

September 8th, 2460
CSV *Lion of Judah*
League/Terran Coalition Front Lines

Colonel David Cohen, commanding officer of the *CSV Lion of Judah*, tugged on his uniform sweater and let out a yawn. *I guess all these mornings getting up 0430 are catching up with me.* Rapidly closing in on forty years of age, the thirty-eight-year-old man stopped long enough to look in the mirror to make sure his uniform met Coalition Defense Force grooming standards. David preferred the pullover sweater while in space. Most ship crews did because it was naturally colder than average on a massive warship flying through the dark vacuum. David had his regular staff meeting at 0700 Coalition Mean Time every morning, and as per his usual morning ritual, he had already eaten a small breakfast and had visited the shul for morning prayers.

Balancing his duties as the commanding officer of the *Lion* with his responsibilities as a devout practicing Jew was sometimes tricky. David made every effort to meet both

requirements. After confirming that his rank insignia, Space Warfare Officer badge, and nametag were all in the proper places, he walked out of his cabin. During the walk up to the command deck and through the labyrinth of passages that crisscrossed the *Lion*, his mind wandered. Since the Saurian Empire had joined the fight on the side of the Terran Coalition, the entire landscape of the conflict had changed. Under the banner of the Canaan Alliance, the Allied Expeditionary Force—consisting of the Coalition Defense Force and the Royal Saurian Navy—steadily pushed the League back. *It feels satisfying to be winning again.*

As he came off the grav-lift on the command deck, the Terran Coalition Marine Corps sentries that stood watch outside of the bridge/combat information center on the *Lion* saluted David. He acknowledged their salute with one of his own before walking into the conference room where the command staff had assembled. While he was ten minutes early, most of the command staff had already taken their seats.

David smiled inwardly as the mantra his father used to cite—"*Early is on time; on time is late. Never be late.*"—ran through his head.

All present stood and came to attention. "As you were," David responded, acknowledging the respect shown.

First Lieutenant Ruth Goldberg, a short, petite woman in her late twenties, was the first to reply. Ruth was the *Lion*'s Tactical Action Officer; with David's guidance, she fought the ship in combat. "Good night's rest, sir?"

David grinned. "I find that when we're pressing the League out of our space, it's a lot easier to sleep at night."

Calvin Demood—a lieutenant colonel in the Terran Coalition Marine Corps and the commander of the *Lion*'s Marine Expeditionary Unit—gave a belly laugh. "Who needs

sleep when we're pasting League ships all over the place? As far as I'm concerned, this will never get old."

David smirked; he had grown to like the tough Marine. His no-nonsense way of looking at the universe was refreshing. The one thing he couldn't entirely agree with was Calvin's seeming desire to kill every last Leaguer. *"The only good Leaguer is a dead Leaguer,"* he'd said more than once. Regardless of that, David had the utmost respect for Calvin's abilities. Over and over again, his Marines had proven themselves in battle. He was sure that was in large part due to older Marine's leadership and tactical abilities.

Master Chief Rebecca Tinetariro was also present; she was the senior enlisted soldier on the *Lion of Judah*. A twenty-seven-year veteran of the CDF, Tinetariro hailed from the African Union and was tall for a woman at nearly six feet. She was an imposing figure with a strong command presence. David had developed a great deal of respect for her in the past eight weeks since her assignment to the *Lion*. "Good morning, sir," she said to him in her posh British accent.

"And a good morning to you as well, Master Chief," David replied. "How's that gospel choir going?"

Tinetariro smiled; there was something about the way she smiled that would have made David's blood run cold had he been under her command. "Getting there, sir. Would have been nice if that spiffy Marine Corps band had stayed onboard."

"I liked them too. Flag ceremony with a live band was special."

David took his seat at the head of the table; First Lieutenant Shelly Hammond, the *Lion*'s senior navigator, and First Lieutenant Robert Taylor, the communications officer, were present and seated. Both of them were quiet and reserved, rarely speaking in a staff meeting unless

spoken to first. Major Arthur Hanson, the *Lion*'s chief engineer, was also present and sat to his right hand. An outgoing nerd, Hanson had worked on a reactor design team for a new generation of fusion reactors deployed to the latest breed of CDF destroyer before serving with David, first on the *Yitzhak Rabin*, and now on the *Lion*.

Kenneth Lowe, the lone civilian in the room, sat to his left at the table. David made eye contact with the lanky defense contractor and received a respectful head nod in return. Kenneth and his small army of technical support contractors had been instrumental in keeping the *Lion* in fighting shape over the last eight weeks. Without their help, it was unlikely the newly trained military crew would have been able to keep all of the new technology, gizmos, and gadgets operational.

Right on cue, Lieutenant Colonel Talgat Aibek entered the room. The jovial Saurian had grown on David. Aibek's humor was so dry it could burn, but the Saurian was a valuable member of the team who had stepped into the executive officer role with gusto. Serving as his right hand onboard the *Lion*, Aibek kept the ship's departments and personnel running.

But every time Aibek walked into the room, it was a bitter reminder of Sheila Thompson's death. The emotional pain from Sheila's death, while faded due to what David believed was a vision from God, was still there. They had known each other for nearly twenty years; knowing he would never see her again, speak with her again, or embrace her again weighed heavily on him. Coupled with his belatedly realized feelings of love for her, there were days when the abyss of depression and despair gnawed at him, tempting him to fall into it. That abyss was an ever-constant companion, one he actively had to fight off.

"Good morning, Colonel Cohen!" Aibek's booming voice said, carrying across the room.

“Banker’s hours, Colonel Aibek?” David asked playfully, but with a slight edge. He hated his officers being late to meetings.

“I got carried away in my morning exercise routine,” Aibek responded, chastened. Making his way around the table, Aibek sat down next to Doctor Izmet Tural, the *Lion*’s chief medical officer.

The last arrivals filled the remaining two chairs at the conference table. Hassan Amir, the air wing commander onboard the *Lion*, also known as the CAG, an old military term that stood for Commander Air Group, which had survived the ages, and Major Elizabeth Merriweather, the engineer in charge of the military personnel attached to the advanced reactor program that powered the *Lion*’s antimatter reactor.

“Let’s get started, people,” David said, and turned to Aibek. “Ship’s readiness, XO?”

“Shipshape in Bristol fashion, sir.”

Ruth cleared her throat. “Colonel, with respect, you’re not British, sir.” It had become normal for her to be a bit more sarcastic in meetings.

David broke into a grin. “So we’re in mint condition, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” Aibek said with a grin in return.

“Colonel Amir, status of the fighter wing?”

“We have fourteen squadrons at maximum readiness, Colonel. I’ve put two squadrons that took significant losses in our last few engagements into reserve status until we receive replacement pilots,” Amir said.

“Very good. The last few weeks have almost been too easy.”

“Lanchester’s Law, sir,” Hammond interjected, drawing looks from some of the staff.

Aibek peered at her. “What is that, Lieutenant?”

“It’s a set of differential equations that determine firepower and combat effectiveness between military forces, sir. One of the postulations is that a larger force will defeat a smaller force with fewer losses than between an even force. Given that we’ve been hitting the League with locally superior forces due to the alliance… it makes sense that we’re taking fewer losses while hammering the League fleet.”

“I didn’t realize you studied military history, Lieutenant. Impressive and correct,” David said in what he hoped was an encouraging manner.

He punched a button, bringing up a holographic representation of local space displayed in the middle of the conference table. “If you will note the front-line designations, our orders are to support the push forward by Admiral Resit Kartal. The fighting will be sustained and heavy as we attempt to dislodge a major League force consisting of multiple carrier battle groups and large capital ship formations. If we can punch through here, however….it will be clear sailing. At least, according to CDF Intelligence.”

“CDF Intelligence. Now there’s an oxymoron if I’ve ever heard one,” Hanson said. “Whatever they say is usually wrong.”

Multiple chuckles and snickers sounded around the room; they generally held intelligence services of any stripe in various states of disrepute. *Out on the sharp tip of the spear, bad intel gets people killed.*

The intercom suddenly interrupted the meeting. “Bridge to Colonel Cohen. This is the command duty officer.”

David recognized the voice of a young first lieutenant who had drawn watch duty as CDO. “Go ahead, Lieutenant Jackson.”

“Sir, we’re receiving a high-level encrypted flash communication from the CSV *Oxford*. It’s addressed to you,

sir. Shall I put it through to the conference room?"

"Pipe it in, Lieutenant."

A moment later, the face of Colonel Robert Sinclair, the CO of the security operations monitoring center onboard the *Oxford*, a CDF "technical support" ship, which in reality was a spy ship, appeared on the holographic viewer.

"Colonel Sinclair, how's spookville today?" David asked. They had been working closely with the *Oxford* and Colonel Sinclair over the past few weeks; David had built a rapport with him and found the *Oxford*'s operations impressive.

"Quite well, Colonel Cohen," Sinclair said in his posh British accent, bearing a grin. "I've got something that might interest you and your officers. We have a vector bearing and location on the LX *Tours* and her battlegroup. They're currently effecting repairs after the last engagement they had with CDF and RSN forces that didn't go their way. As the closest combat-effective force, Admiral Kartal wants you to hit them hard and fast."

The assembled officers exchanged looks while David felt his battle spirit stir. The *Tours* was a League fleet carrier; she had over four hundred fighters onboard and was a dangerous opponent. To be able to catch her and her consorts with their pants down… he could scarcely believe their luck.

"Any idea how long she's going to be parked in her current location, Colonel?"

"Not with any real confidence. We're sure they've been at their current coordinates for at least an hour. Since we're not sure what shape the carrier is in, Admiral Kartal is requesting immediate engagement by friendly forces. How long for the *Lion* and her battlegroup to transit in?"

David glanced at Aibek. "Are we ready to engage, XO?"

Aibek's head bobbed up and down. "Yes, sir. Our battlegroup is at maximum readiness."

“Call it thirty minutes to ensure our escorts are ready to jump, get our flight wing on ready five status, and prep for action. Tell Admiral Kartal we’ll engage the enemy within the next thirty-five minutes, Colonel.”

“Understood, Colonel Cohen. Good luck, good hunting, and Godspeed. *Oxford* out.”

David sat back in his chair, looking around at his senior staff. “Well, that wasn’t quite how I was expecting today to start, ladies and gentlemen.”

Kenneth piped up. “I think I can speak for everyone and say it will be nice to paste a League carrier.” Kenneth smiled brightly after he finished speaking.

A few of the officers chuckled, as did David. Calvin, however, couldn’t resist the chance to tease the contractor. “Hey, if you ever want a real job, Kenneth…I’ll get you started in boot camp any time. Then you can do more than talk about kicking the League’s ass and actually do it.”

There was again a smattering of laughter as Kenneth interjected his retort. “Colonel, let me know when you retire. I’ll get you set up in something you can do from your assisted living facility.”

“Ouch!” David roared while laughing out loud along with the rest of the team.

“What is it with these smart-ass comms geeks on this ship?” Calvin said in his faux annoyed tone. “Well, Kenneth, you may be a smart ass, but at least your partner in crime, Lieutenant Taylor, can throw a punch. And use pugil sticks. Until you can, stow it.”

“I think you hit a nerve, Kenneth,” Ruth said with a wicked grin on her face.

David pushed back his chair and stood. “Okay, people, that’s enough. We’ve got thirty-five minutes to get this ship ready for action. Bridge team, follow me. Everyone else…you know your duty. Get to it. Dismissed.”

There was a smattering of “Yes, sir,” and “Aye aye, sir,” as the officers stood and walked out; David waited until everyone else had left before following them out the door. This would be the third engagement this week; the heightened battle rhythm was ordinarily a challenge for the crew. They had been going all out for the last eight weeks, and to David’s surprise, there had been no requests for R&R or time off. From his vantage point, the entire ship functioned like a well-oiled machine that had one goal: driving the League of Sol from their space. Still, at some point, human beings simply got tired. David worried that when that point came, if it came at the wrong time, there would be a reckoning.

Lost in his thoughts for a moment, when David exited the conference room, the corridor was empty except for the two Marine guards standing watch in front of the bridge/combat information center hatch. David strode to the door as the Marines smartly saluted him.

“Gentlemen,” David said as an acknowledgment, pulling his cover—what the military called a hat—on as he walked through the hatch onto the bridge of the *Lion of Judah*. It was such an impressive sight to him, one that never got old. Nearly thirty officers and crew manned the cavernous bridge, coupled with a full Combat Information Center. Most of the weapons and systems were automated, but there were still massive amounts of information to sift through quickly so that watch-standing officers would be able to make informed and proper decisions, especially in the heat of combat.

A moment after David entered the bridge, the familiar voice of Master Chief Tinetariro announced, “Commanding officer on the bridge!”

All personnel that stood had braced to attention and brought their hands to their brows in salute. David quickly

brought his hand up and crisply returned their salutes. “As you were.”

As he looked around the bridge one more time, a smile flashed onto David’s face. He was so proud of his crew, of his ship. At times like this, he could almost feel his father and Sheila standing there with him. Focusing his mind back on the task at hand, he walked over to the CO’s and XO’s chairs. Aibek had already taken his position in the XO’s chair, but the young lieutenant that had stood watch still held the conn.

“Lieutenant Jackson, I have the conn,” David said.

The young man quickly stood and stepped to the side. “Colonel Cohen has the conn, aye, sir.”

Sitting down in the CO’s chair, David glanced at Aibek. “Settled in, XO?”

The large Saurian grinned. “Yes, sir. Ready to go, sir.”

“Outstanding.”

David looked up at his tactical monitor, a display that was configurable by him to show information he wanted to consume during a battle or at any point. He liked to see metrics on propulsion, shield strength, and weapons status, and as such had programmed his monitor to display them. As he reviewed the screen, everything was showing normal, charged, and ready.

David punched a button on his chair for 1MC, the ship-wide intercom. “General Quarters! General Quarters! This is the commanding officer. Man your battle stations! I say again, man your battle stations! Set material condition one throughout the ship! This is not a drill! I say again, this is not a drill!” David used a set of words he had now uttered numerous times on the *Lion*. As he spoke, the alarm klaxon wailed throughout the massive vessel, and the lights on the bridge dimmed to a blue color. CDF studies said that the blue hue helped personnel concentrate better; he didn’t know if

that was really accurate, but it did help to brighten up their tactical displays.

"TAO, load all magnetic cannons with armor-piercing rounds."

"Aye, sir, loading all magnetic cannons with armor-piercing rounds!" Ruth said.

"Navigation, plot a Lawrence drive jump to the coordinates supplied by the CSV Oxford."

"Aye, sir!" Hammond said.

"Communications, signal our escorting destroyers to match our Lawrence drive coordinates; they will follow us through on our signal."

"Yes, sir!" Taylor said.

His initial orders delivered, David sat back in his seat. He knew that, right now, the flight crews for their fighters and bombers would be running like mad readying the nearly two hundred combat spacecraft they carried for the fight to come. Thousands of crewmen and women would be donning firefighting gear, manning damage control teams, and preparing for the battle to come. *This is the hardest time*. The clock ticking was down to engagement; knowing what was happening and having to adjust mentally took iron will. They had twenty-eight minutes to go before launching into the unknown.

Hassan Amir stood in the ready room for the fighter squadron he commanded, the Grim Reapers, known as the Reapers for short. Compared to the smaller carriers he'd served on, the *Lion*'s pilots' ready rooms were the picture of luxury. Large, comfortable leather recliners dotted the room, along with the latest in holoprojector technology for fully three-dimensional briefings. But regardless of where they sat

waiting for the next battle or how comfortable the chairs were, nothing stopped the feeling of dread right before combat. *That feeling never goes away. But roaring into space at maximum speed makes up for it.* Stepping up to the podium, he began the briefing.

"Grim Reapers…we're about to get a shot at something we can only dream of most of the time." Amir flashed a warrior's smile. "The *Lion of Judah* and her battle group will be engaging the LX *Tours*… a frontline League fleet carrier."

There were whoops and hollers from the pilots; Amir saw faces of near glee staring back at him. It was rare to get to engage a League fleet carrier.

"They don't have many because they throw most of their resources into thousands of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, and overwhelm their enemies with numbers. So getting to polish one off will be a true accomplishment." Amir pulled up a holographic projection of the *Tours.* "Take special note of her point defense emplacements; our job, besides escorting the heavy bombers in, will be to fire decoys into the fray so that her point defense loses effectiveness. Each decoy it shoots down is one less fighter or bomber we'll lose."

Amir stepped back from the podium, looking out at the other eleven pilots in his squadron. "Above all, stay safe. The last eight weeks have been a time we have not experienced before. Do not allow complacency to enter your minds. No matter how superior our technology, you must respect the League's pilots. If you do not, they will use that against us and destroy us. Any questions?"

"Sir, any information on enemy CSP?" a pilot in the back of the room shouted. CSP stood for combat space patrol.

"None, Lieutenant. The *Oxford*'s sensors couldn't get a read on fighter craft already launched. We must assume they

will have at least a squadron on standard CSP, and another couple on ready five."

"The *Tours* has four hundred combat spacecraft on it, correct, sir?" another pilot called out.

"That is correct."

"Sir, do we think they could scramble enough to make this a real fight? We're down two squadrons."

"We prevent that by hitting hard first. Our bombers will be focusing on the flight bays of the *Tours*. As long as we disable two out of its four main launching points, they will be unable to launch enough fighters and bombers to engage effectively."

"And if we don't disable those launching points, sir?"

"Then we will have a target-rich environment, Captain." Amir smiled wide as he spoke. "Any other questions?"

The room was silent; no further questions were asked. "Very well. Man your fighters! I want everyone on ready five in the next fifteen minutes. Move out, pilots! Godspeed!"

2

THIRTY-FOUR MINUTES HAD PASSED by on the bridge of *Lion of Judah*, and David was as anxious as ever. *The calm that comes over me during battle isn't there before it.* When he checked over his command display one more time, the readout showed that the ship was ready to jump, all systems were nominal, and the weapon systems were active. All that remained was to give the order to engage.

David looked down, bowing his head. Before every battle he'd ever fought in while leading soldiers, he offered a prayer to God. Today was no different. "God, please hear my prayer," he whispered. "I ask you only to protect those under my command, and if it is your will, to spare their lives and protect them from harm. Amen."

Glancing back up, he saw Aibek staring at him. "The same prayer, Colonel?"

"Every time, every battle."

"I, too, pray before battle, though I ask God to help me wield my sword to slay the enemy."

"The Torah tells us not to kill. I don't feel it's my right to ask God to help me kill another of his creations. I believe he must look at this carnage and any war as an abhorrence. Still, I ask that he protect the lives of those who serve."

“A noble sentiment.”

“Thank you.”

David sucked in a breath. *Time to do this*. “Navigation, status of Lawrence drive?”

The Lawrence drive was the primary faster-than-light travel mechanism used by all known races in the Milky Way galaxy. It worked by creating an artificial wormhole between two points and allowing a ship to traverse it under sub-light engine power.

“Lawrence drive fully charged, coordinates from the *Oxford* are locked in, and all systems show green, sir,” Hammond said.

“Very well.” David paused for a moment. *A few words of encouragement might help*. He looked down at his chair and punched up 1MC— the intercom tie-in that allowed him to speak into every single compartment of the ship and reach every last member of the crew. “Attention, all hands. This is your commanding officer. I wanted you all to know that we’re about to jump back into battle against the League. Our objective is to neutralize a League fleet carrier and its battle group. We’ve got what we think is good intelligence, but when it comes down to it, how well we remember and execute our training is what will make the difference in the next few minutes. So trust in your training, trust in your comrades-in-arms to your right and to your left. Above all, trust in God and his blessing. Godspeed.”

David sat back in his chair and glanced around the room one last time. “Navigation, commence jump.”

Hammond quickly responded, “Aye, sir, commencing jump.”

Over the next few seconds, the massive Lawrence drive generators within the *Lion* sprang to life, folding space upon itself and opening a dazzling, artificial wormhole in front of the mighty warship. The *Lion*’s sub-light engines kicked in,

and the warship flew through the void and into the mouth of the wormhole, closely followed by its eight escorting destroyers.

During the five-second window between emergence from the wormhole and sensors returning to normal, David's mind was alive, running through possible scenarios. *Is this another League trap?* It was hard to tell with the so-called fog of war; a catch-all term of impediments to seeing the whole battlefield.

"Conn, TAO. LIDAR array online. I've got eight ship contacts, sir," Ruth announced, interrupting David's thoughts and snapping his brain back full onto the battle at hand. "One League fleet carrier, designated Master One. Two Rand class cruisers, designed Master Two and Three. Six Cobra class destroyers designated Master Four through Nine."

"TAO, does Master One have a CSP in space?"

"Conn, TAO. I show a six fighter CSP. No other active small craft, sir."

David looked at Aibek. "Doesn't look like a trap."

"No, it doesn't, sir," Aibek said.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master Two. Set firing solution for mag-cannons and neutron beams,"

"Aye, sir, firing solution set."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons," David said, his voice calm, cool, and collected.

Armor-piercing magnetic cannon rounds raced away from the *Lion*. Also known as a mag-cannon, their primary armament consisted of what amounted to a rail-gun. It fired shells with different configurations, including armor-piercing, high explosive, or EMP-generating warheads. The *Lion*'s secondary armament of high-energy neutron beams lashed out at the League cruiser as well. Its shields failed, and multiple shots impacted on the Rand's hull. One neutron

beam went straight through the League ship, blowing pieces of alloy and armor out the other side of the vessel.

"Conn, TAO. Master Two has been neutralized and is launching escape pods, sir."

"Good shooting, Lieutenant. Communications, signal Colonel Amir to launch his wing. Primary target is Master One. Signal our escorts to focus their fire on Masters Four through Nine."

"Aye, sir," Taylor said.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master Three. Set firing solution for mag-cannons and neutron beams," David ordered, entirely absorbed by the battle.

"Firing solution set, sir."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons," David said, the procedure for a ship-based combat evolution firmly entrenched in his mind, almost to the point of being automatic.

Again, the massive magnetic cannons, the *Lion*'s primary armament, thundered in space; though you wouldn't have heard a thing if you were outside the ship. *There's no sound in space, after all.* They spat twenty-eight-hundred-pound projectiles toward the League Rand class cruiser; smacking into its shields and causing them to collapse. Followed up by judicious neutron beam strikes, Ruth's attentions quickly rendered the League ship adrift in space. *One-part science, one-part skill, and one-part art, Ruth is one of the best TAOs I've ever seen.*

"Conn, TAO. Master Three has been disabled and is drifting in space, sir."

David glanced at Aibek. "I think it's time to turn our attention to the *Tours*. What do you think, XO?"

Aibek grinned widely. "I couldn't agree more, Colonel."

David's eyes went to the tactical plot on the screen directly above his chair. The fighters and bombers from the

Lion had begun to launch and were forming up.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master One. Set firing solution for mag-cannons, neutron beams. Make tubes one through twenty ready in all respects, target Master One."

"Firing solution set, sir." She paused a moment. "Tubes one through twenty ready in all respects. Twenty Hunter missiles ready for launch."

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, all weapons."

David watched on his tactical plot as the *Lion*'s weapons suite lashed out against the massive League carrier. *The sheer amount of firepower that the* Lion *carries is incredible*. The *Lion* had more missiles on it than six missile cruisers, and more magnetic cannons than any four heavy cruisers.

"Conn, TAO! All magnetic cannon rounds impacted on Master One, sir! Eighteen of twenty missiles impacted… Master One's shields are holding."

Time to send in the bombers and overwhelm the League carrier before it can jump out. "Communications, signal Colonel Amir to begin his attack run on Master One."

Amir rested his head against the neck rest inside of the cockpit of his SF-106 Phantom space superiority fighter. *I will never get tired of flying these things.* With a full load out of squadrons assigned to the *Lion*, he now had to give orders and maintain control over more fighters and bombers than he'd ever commanded in his career. He used the neural interface with his craft to pull up the tactical plot and quickly checked to see if the one hundred sixty-eight combat spacecraft from his wing were all in space and accounted for. There were no yellow or red status lights; this indicated that the entire wing was in space and ready to fight.

“Now that is a sight,” said Major Rebecca Tulleny, her upper-class British accent cutting into Amir’s thoughts.

“What sight is that?” Amir responded after cueing his communication channel to the private two-way channel in the command net specifically for the CAG and his deputy.

“A League fleet carrier that’s about to be wiped out of the universe.”

“As Allah wills it.”

Lieutenant Taylor’s voice cut into the chatter between the two pilots. “Colonel Amir, this is Lieutenant Taylor. Colonel Cohen is ordering the *Lion*’s flight wing to engage Master One. Good hunting and Godspeed!”

Amir adjusted his tactical scanner, directing it forward. “And now, we get to take one of these things out for real. You know how many times I’ve made a run at the League fleet carrier only to have it disengage?”

“Too many times,” Tulleny said through the static of the communication channel.

Amir flipped his communication channel to broadcast to all fighters within the *Lion*’s wing. “Pilots, this is CAG Amir. We’ve been ordered to commence our attack run against Master One. Space superiority fighters…form up around our heavy bombers. Time is of the essence… we must prevent the *Tours* from launching its fighter squadrons. Amir out!”

“Here goes nothing,” Tulleny said in her typical deadpan style.

“I think our best chance to inflict real damage is to volley fire our anti-ship missiles into the hangar deck areas of the *Tours* and hope for secondary explosions.”

“I concur, Colonel; I’ll form up the bombers for that attack profile. Just keep those League fighters off us.”

“Have I ever let you down in that department?”.

“Never.”

“Good hunting, Major. *Insula Allah*,” Amir said, invoking an Arabic phrase for “if God wills it.”

Amir flipped his communication network to the channel used by his squadron. “Reapers, break left, form on me. We’re going to engage the enemy CSP. Initiate max speed!”

Toggling up the throttle on his fighter, Amir was instantly pressed backward in his seat. With the inertial dampeners at maximum, he still felt five Gs—or five times normal earth gravity—pressing him down. His craft was pulling close to fifteen Gs, enough to kill any normal human without a working inertial dampener.

Amir glanced up at the heads-up display, or HUD, that was projected into the canopy of his fighter’s cockpit. He noted with satisfaction that his squadron had formed a perfect sphere around his spacecraft, just as they had drilled so many times in training. Turning his attention to the forward-facing LIDAR scanner, he realized that the *Tours’* entire CSP hurtled through space toward them. *Well, they’ve got guts, I’ll give them that*. Six League fighters versus the wing of Terran Coalition spacecraft was no contest at all.

“Reapers, tally ho! Six bandits at twelve o’clock. Weapons free!” Amir announced into his mic.

Lining up the first League fighter to enter maximum range of his fighter, Amir waited a moment to receive a missile lock-on tone. “Reaper one, Fox three!” The missile sprang away from his craft, its engine roaring as soon he depressed the fire button.

“Reaper three, Fox three!” another pilot called out. Amir watched his tactical plot as it showed a dozen LIDAR tracking warheads racing toward the League fighters from his squadron. The icons for the League fighters began to blink out one by one as the missiles connected and blew them out of space.

“Kill six! I say again, kill six! Good shooting, Reapers!”

The way is clear, Amir reflected, looking at the LIDAR display on his HUD. He flipped the communication channel to Tulleny's channel. "Major, we need to put as many anti-ship missiles on target as possible."

"Understood, Colonel."

"Don't bother with making passes and obtaining locks. Force the missiles to manual release mode, get point blank, and ripple fire everything you've got."

"That's a bit risky, don't you think?" Tulleny questioned him.

"It's a risk that's justified by taking down one of four known operating League fleet carriers in our space."

"Aye, sir. We're moving to engage."

Amir again turned up the throttle to maximum, his craft racing forward in the vacuum, his mind filled with fury. "*Allu Akbar*," he said out loud and pushed back in his seat, looking forward to the destruction of the *Tours*.

3

BACK IN THE EXPANSIVE BRIDGE/COMBAT information center onboard the *Lion of Judah*, David focused on engaging the League fleet carrier; he could see from his tactical plot that the *Lion*'s consorts had made short work of the *Tours'* destroyer escorts.

"Conn, TAO. Enemy CSP neutralized, sir," Ruth said.

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master One. Target all available Hunter and Starbolt missiles forward VRLS, make tubes twenty-one through one hundred and twenty ready in all respects."

"Aye aye, sir, firing solution set, tubes twenty-one through one hundred and twenty ready in all respects."

"TAO, firing point procedures, Master One, mag-cannons, and neutron beams."

"Aye aye, sir, firing solution set."

"TAO, shoot, mag-cannons and neutron beams."

"Conn, TAO. Multiple impacts on Master One, sir. Master One's shields continue to hold," Ruth said.

Aibek looked at David with his eyebrows scrunched together. "What's the plan, sir?"

David glanced over at Aibek momentarily before going back to his tactical plot. "Hammer their shields, and then

combine our missile volley with the bombers attack to overload their remaining energy shields and armor. Cause as much damage as possible, then attack the flight decks with our mag-cannons."

"That makes sense, sir."

"Conn, TAO. Friendly fast movers are engaging Master One, sir."

"TAO, put the visual image up on my display."

A video from the *Lion*'s forward imaging array popped onto David's personal monitor. Aibek squeezed over to get the best look he could his chair. It showed the flight of four bomber squadrons closing fast with the League's fleet carrier before firing off dozens of missiles. "Smart. Amir had his bomber pilots mass fire their anti-ship missiles at short range," David commented.

Aibek nodded. "An effective tactic."

"TAO, shoot, all missiles," David said, sending the *Lion*'s missile armament into the fray. They had twenty Hunters and eighty Starbolt missiles left in the forward vertical missile launch array; the weapons thundered out of the *Lion*, causing the ship to lurch to one side as they roared out of their tubes in unison.

"Conn, TAO. All missiles running hot, straight, and normal, sir."

David watched on his monitor, which he switched back to the standard tactical plot, as the *Lion*'s salvo raced across space and impacted onto the shields of the massive League carrier. After eighty percent of their weapons had smashed into its surface, the defensive screens on the *Tours* failed. As his mind raced to form the words to target and shoot at the *Tours* further, Ruth interrupted his thoughts.

"Conn, TAO! Detecting Lawrence drive activation from Master One."

Argh, we're out of time.

“Navigation, emergency intercept on Master One. Line us up as fast as you can!”

“Aye aye, sir,” Hammond said crisply.

David counted off four seconds and hoped his navigator was as good as he thought she was. “TAO, snap shot, forward particle beams one through four, Master One.” *It’s a risk, but more than worth it; taking out a League fleet carrier is the stuff of legends*.

“Snap shot, forward particle beams, Master One, aye, sir,” Ruth said as she rapidly depressed the controls on her console to fire the four forward-facing particle beams mounted along the ventral axis of the ship. They could only shoot directly ahead and counted on precise aiming. A snap shot was a Hail Mary; it meant firing the weapons without an affirmative firing solution and without matching bearings with the target.

The four particle beams radiated with power and erupted into the vacuum. The two to the port side of the ship missed entirely, hitting nothing but empty space. The two on the starboard side of the *Lion* connected. The top beam grazed the *Tours*, blasting armor plating off its hull, but the lower beam impacted straight onto one of the large hangar bays on the *Tours’* port side. It drilled through meters of armor, blasting through the ship’s superstructure, and out the other side. A couple of seconds passed, and secondary explosions blossomed around the area the beam struck. Massive chunks of the League carrier exploded from the inside out, and the area around them turned molten.

Watching it play out on his monitor, David was in awe at the raw power the *Lion* had to project. *This ship is a thing of wonder*.

Ruth interrupted his thoughts. “Conn, TAO! Master One is venting atmosphere and scans show it has lost all primary

power. I'm showing escape pods launching. Master One has been neutralized!"

A shout went up on the bridge as the junior officers, and enlisted ratings cheered. Ever the strict disciplinarian, Master Chief Tinetariro, silenced the outburst. "As you were! Maintain proper bridge protocols, or I'll have anyone who doesn't comply removed!"

The tumult ceased immediately. David, while excited himself, stared forward with his mask of professionalism.

Taylor spoke up, "Sir, the *Tours* is requesting communication with us."

"Put it through to my viewer, Lieutenant."

A video feed from the stricken vessel came into focus on David's personal monitor. The grim and blood-smeared face of a junior League officer appeared. "Coalition Defense Force vessel, this is Lieutenant Zina Naoumov, the ranking officer onboard the LX *Tours*. We are requesting a cease-fire."

David stared at the young woman for a moment, assuming she was like many League officers, of Russian descent, based on her name and her obvious accented English. "This is the Commanding Officer of the CSV *Lion of Judah*, Colonel David Cohen. What are your intentions?"

"Would you be willing to discuss our surrender?"

David could see in her facial expression how her lips drooped down, and her shoulders sagged, that not only was she defeated, but ashamed. "Of course, Lieutenant. Stand down your weapons and prepare to be boarded. I give you my word if your crew doesn't resist; no harm will come to them."

"What will happen to us?"

"You will be remanded to the custody of CDF Security, and put in a POW camp for the duration of the war. We will treat you with dignity, provide living quarters, food, and

exercise as per the Canaan Alliance charter regarding the treatment of POWs."

"Very well, Colonel. The *Tours* surrenders."

"I accept your surrender, Lieutenant. Our Marines will arrive shortly. Ensure that all weapons are stowed and no resistance is offered. If it is…the Marines will use deadly force."

"There shall be no resistance. I give my word of honor."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. *Lion of Judah* out."

David sat back slowly in his seat. Aibek looked over at him. "Are you sure we should waste the resources on transporting them to a POW camp?"

David raised his eyebrows. "Please tell me that's a joke."

Aibek snorted. "Don't you have citizens of your own planets that go without three hot meals a day as you put it? Why waste the money on these… vermin?"

"Most of them are conscripts, forced to fight. They have no control over their destiny. I doubt most of them want to be out here, fighting us daily. The League's communist system forces them to do what they do, and if they refuse, their families are exiled to their remote border planets or worse. What would you have us do, execute them all?"

Aibek's face morphed into an amused smile. "Of course not, Colonel! I'm not barbaric… I'd make them build ships for us to fight their former comrades."

"Slave labor? Set aside the fact that it's morally wrong and something we stand against as a people… do you really think that League POWs forced to build things for us wouldn't take every opportunity to sabotage whatever they were assigned to do?"

"That's a compelling argument for executing them, Colonel," Aibek said with another toothy grin.

"That's outrageous, we're…" David paused, realizing that Aibek was employing his dry Saurian brand of humor. "You

got me there, Colonel."

Aibek laughed. "You humans simply aren't used to my sense of humor."

"Conn, Communications. Colonel Amir reports his wing is beginning to sweep the area for escape pods. He also reports no losses or damage among his wing," Taylor announced.

David glanced at Aibek. "Not bad. We just wiped out a League task force and fleet carrier…without losing a single fighter or ship of our own. I'll take that. Communications, raise Admiral Kartal's flagship and alert the command duty officer to our success."

"Aye, sir."

"TAO, stand down condition one. Rig the ship for condition two."

"Aye, sir, standing down condition one and moving the ship to condition two."

The lights immediately switched from the deep blue hue of condition one to standard white lights. David punched up the intercom link on his command chair for the Air Boss; the officer that controlled all flights in and out of the *Lion*'s expansive flight deck. "Boss, this is Colonel Cohen. Launch search and rescue. There are quite a few League escape pods to collect."

"Understood, Colonel. S&R is on its way."

That duty discharged, David punched in a new intercom code; Calvin's Marine Expeditionary Unit command center. A moment later, Calvin's cheery voice was on the intercom. "Colonel Demood."

"Colonel, ready to go round up some prisoners from the *Tours*?"

"That sounds like a mission for the Marines. We'll be happy to oblige, sir."

"They've agreed to surrender, Colonel. Order your Marines to load their weapons with non-lethal rounds.

However, if you encounter resistance, you may use any force required to secure that ship. Clear?"

"Yes, sir. We'll clean them out. Want us to raise the Terran Coalition flag on that ship?"

David and Aibek snickered at the same time. "Go for it, Colonel."

"Demood out."

David sat back in his chair. "Damage report, XO?"

"No damage aside from a couple of singes on the paint, sir. No casualties on the *Lion* or our escorts."

"Conn, Communications. I have Admiral Kartal for you, sir," Taylor interjected.

"Put it on my viewer, Lieutenant."

Admiral Resit Kartal, an imposing Saurian of considerable height, measuring more than six feet eight inches, came into focus on David's monitor. He wore what looked like a CDF uniform, but with Saurian rank insignia, medals, and badges. *Either Saurians like to give out awards or this guy is the real deal.*

"Admiral Kartal, greetings, sir," David said.

"Greetings, Colonel Cohen. I understand you have engaged the *Tours* and that the battle was victorious."

"Yes, sir, it was. Thanks to the timely intelligence of the CSV *Oxford*, we got the drop on them. The *Tours* has been disabled, her escorts destroyed, and we took no losses. Clean sweep, sir." As David finished his sentence, a wide grin broke out on his face. *I probably shouldn't be so happy we just pasted these guys and killed thousands of them, but that felt good. A few more victories like this and the League will run all the way back to Earth.*

"My compliments to you and your crew, Colonel. Make sure that embedded reporter files a good story on it. We need morale to stay high, as always."

"Of course, sir. What are our orders?"

“Resume your patrol, Colonel Cohen. Continue to attack targets of opportunity. Once the Joint Chiefs of Staff of our respective militaries have finalized the next phase of our battle plan, we’ll brief you and the rest of our operational leaders. Godspeed, Kartal out.”

Ah, so it’s another day in the office after all. I’d better have a talk with that reporter and make sure she’s on the same page as the rest of us.

4

ANGIE DENMAN, the embedded reporter from the Galactic News Network on the *Lion of Judah*, strode quickly down the corridor toward Colonel Cohen's office. *Not a corridor… it's called a passageway. I should remember that… I did this for four years.* Smiling to herself as she pressed the buzzer next to a wall plate that read "Commanding Officer—CSV *Lion of Judah,*" Angie waited for the door to open.

"Come!" David yelled from within his office, and the door slid open automatically.

Angie walked into the office as David stood. She'd noticed he'd always get up when she walked in. *Either he's a gentleman, or I put him off somehow.*

"Ms. Denman, a pleasure."

"Angie, please. I've been here for four weeks now."

David gestured to the chairs in front of his desk; Angie sat down first, after which David also sat. Angie's eyes roamed over David's workspace; she continued to be amused by his selection of knickknacks, but mostly at the hand grenade attached to a piece of wood with a plaque on it that read "Complaint Department, please take a number." There was a little piece of plastic with a "1" on it that hung off the firing

pin. It seemed to fit David's style: brash, unapologetic, and politically incorrect.

"How are you today, Colonel?"

"Oh, all things considered, not a bad day. We defeated a League carrier and its battlegroup and didn't lose a single soldier or pilot."

"Well, at least not on our side."

"That's true. The League lost at least ten thousand soldiers today."

"Your note said you wanted to discuss GNN's coverage?" Angie's voice trailed off after asking the question. In truth, she was always apprehensive discussing her reports.

"Ms. Den…," David stopped himself mid-word. "Angie, I understand that GNN's policy is that it's a neutral reporter of facts. But you're on the ground here with us. On the sharp tip of the spear, so to speak. I read your background report before I agreed to allow you on my ship. I know you served in the CDF to the point you were promoted to sergeant before the end of your four-year enlistment. Heck, making E-5 in four years is a feat in and of itself. What I don't understand is why your reports from the *Lion* lack…gusto."

"You mean, why aren't I promoting the successes and downplaying the failures?"

David smiled thinly at her. "What failures? We haven't lost yet."

Oh, I could so pop that ego of his. "'Yet' being the operative word in that sentence, Colonel."

"David, please."

"The point still stands, David. We're not a propaganda arm for the Coalition Defense Force. We report the news straight down the middle. If you want cheerleading, you might want to look into getting a reporter from Canaan News Network on your ship." Angie smiled as she finished her statement.

“I asked for an embed from Canaan News Network but was denied.”

“Are you saying you don’t want me around?”

David’s expression softened. “Not at all. I respect your reporting, and I respect that you believe in being neutral. However, I don’t completely buy that GNN is neutral. The ambush interview I had with Leslie Sharp a few months ago, for instance, is exhibit A.”

“Would it surprise you to know I howled with how you ripped her apart on that live holonet broadcast?”

David’s eyebrows shot up. “It would indeed.”

“Ms. Sharp’s shrill attacks on the military aren’t neutral, and they undermine the credibility of the entire network. It was nice seeing her knocked down a few pegs. Not that you’d ever catch me saying that in public.”

“I would say to you that however you may feel, Ms. Sharp’s point of view is the reigning one at GNN.”

“Even if that’s true, and I don’t think it is… I’m better served by working for GNN and being neutral, rather than cheering on the military from a studio at Canaan News… besides, I’m a brunette, not blonde. They only have blondes on the air.”

David laughed. “Would you consider highlighting some of the positives? Especially the fact that no one died on our side today. Any day I don’t have to write a wife, a mother, a husband, or a father and tell them their loved one died is a good day.”

Angie stared at David for a moment. *He really cares about the people under his command. I thought it was an act at first, but he does.* “I’ll see what I can do there, David. That is something worth reporting.”

“I’m curious. E-5 in four years and you still got out? I suspect you could have gone far in the public affairs office.”

“I don’t work well with rigid command structures I’m not allowed to question.”

“Then why’d you make it to E-5?”

“Because I apply myself to anything I’m in. If it’s worth doing, it’s worth doing right.”

“I feel much the same way,” David said, his eyes dropping as if he’d remembered something.

“You know, I read the biographic sheet the CDFs released on you. You wanted to be a rabbi, and now you’re commanding the largest ship in the CDF. One named after Jesus Christ, for that matter.”

“My life didn’t go on the path I thought it would. I suspect that’s true in most people’s lives. As for the *Lion* being named after Jesus, I prefer to think it’s named after King David.”

“It seems as if you did a lot of studying toward being a rabbi.”

David laughed again. “I like to read. It’s fun. My father used to say you could go anywhere in a book. You’ve got me at a slight disadvantage on this subject, though. My religion is well-known, thanks to the patch on my shoulder. You don’t have one.”

And now comes the awkward part. I wonder how he will react? Angie smiled. “I don’t have a religion.”

David’s eyebrows shot up. “Atheist?”

“No, I’m not convinced there is no God. I just don’t know if there is or isn’t and make no judgment on the subject.”

“Agnostic then, as it were?”

“Yes, I think that’s the label currently in use,” Angie replied, uncomfortable with the topic.

“May I ask why?”

Angie took note of David’s piercing gaze as he asked the question before she replied. “I don’t see enough evidence to convince me there’s a higher power. And if there is, why that

power would allow the kind of barbaric acts that occur every day."

"I beg to differ. There's ample evidence that we're not simply here by random chance."

Angie tilted her head to one side. *Oh great. Now he's going to try to convert me. Let's see how good he is.* "Such as? I'm aware that it's considered scientific consensus, at least among non-atheist scientists, that the universe as we know it is finely tuned for life. But that argument has many problems."

"Really… The statistical odds of the conditions for life in our universe are so astronomical that it defies explanation as anything other than a planned event, controlled by an outside force. Even the big bang itself cannot be explained as a natural event."

"If you go solely on the thought that our carbon-based life is the only type of life possible, yes. But it's also entirely within reason that our universe simply presented a set of baselines for life, and life took it. Purely by random chance."

"I could go back and forth with you on that point for hours, especially around the fact we've never found anything but carbon-based life beyond the microbial stage. But I wonder if I could offer you something else to consider. There's a yes or no answer to the question; is there a higher power that created the universe, correct?"

"Yes, I would agree with that."

"Then look at it like this. If there's a higher power, and we humans choose to worship him, to believe, to do as best we can in our flawed way, what he has laid down as his laws, we have an infinite gain. If we ignore those laws, if we turn our back on him, then we'd have an infinite loss. An eternity spent with our souls in anguish. Christians and Muslims would tell you that's hell. Jews believe it's simply being tossed out, and alone. Neither sounds appetizing to me."

“But what if there isn’t a creator? Then all that time spent worshiping him is for nothing.”

David smiled. “If there isn’t a God, and ‘we’—as you put it—waste our time on our beliefs, our loss is finite. It’s just some of the time we have here in this universe. And if there isn’t a creator and we don’t believe in him, then we have finite gain as well because nothing exists beyond this state of being.”

“I’m not sure where you’re going,” Angie said more as a statement than a question.

“To believe in God and try to keep his precepts, obey his commandments, the worst you can do is a finite loss. To not believe in God, to ignore Him, the worst you can do is an infinite loss. You’re in effect gambling with your soul for all eternity. From a logical point of view, if you have a choice between a possible finite loss and a possible infinite loss, you should take the finite loss every time. I can’t take credit for that argument, mind you. It’s called Pascal’s Wager, and it’s one of the earliest forms of decision theory.”

“I’ve never heard that before. If nothing else, it's interesting,” Angie smiled.

David smiled in return. “Well, give it some thought, then.”

“Is there anything else, David?”

“Not that I can think of. Thank you for dropping by.”

Angie stood up from her chair, and as she did, she had a sudden thought. “David, how about this? I do a sit-down interview with you, and you can discuss the successes of the last few weeks. I’ll let you see the final cut before I send it back to GNN for broadcast. That way, you can get your point of view across, and I can stay neutral.” *And I’ll get a scoop out of it too.*

David’s face remained neutral for a second or two before he broke into a grin. “I’ll have to clear that with General

MacIntosh and Admiral Kartal, but it sounds like a good idea to me."

"Great. I'll see you around."

Deep within the bowels of the *Lion of Judah*, Kenneth Lowe occupied his small, cramped office. Reviewing paperwork for change orders from one of the engineering teams that was fine-tuning the power regulation systems and shields on the *Lion*, he made some notations in the margins of the document before signing it and sending it back to CDF Fleet Support for approval. As he was working, the door chime went off; he'd set his office door to do-not-disturb mode an hour previously so he could catch up on paperwork.

"Come!"

The door slid open, allowing Joshua Carter, Kenneth's overall right-hand man, and Kevin Billings, an older lead for one of the engineering teams, to enter. "Josh, Master Chief. Come on in, gents." He waved them in. "Have a seat."

Carter and Billings plopped down in the two chairs in front of Kenneth's desk. "Boss, you know I didn't earn that rank," Billings said.

"Perhaps not, but what's a master chief do on a ship? Keeps the younger soldiers in line, teaches them, guides them, and above all, finds a way to get things done. That's exactly what you do for your team." Kenneth smiled. "Couldn't do this crap without you."

"Thanks, boss."

"What can I do for you gentlemen today?"

Carter and Billings exchanged glances; Kenneth thought that it looked like they were trying to get the other to go first.

“Well, we’re starting to hear some complaints about all of the overtime,” Carter finally said.

“We’re in a combat zone; there’s going to be overtime, lots of it. We’re getting paid for our trouble too.”

“Yes, sir, I realize that, but some of the guys are starting to grouse that they didn’t sign up for this.”

“How many?”

“Enough that it’s reaching our ears.”

“Suggestions?” Kenneth asked the two men.

“I could PT them around the main hangar bay, sir,” Billings said with a mischievous grin.

“No, that’s not the answer. We’re civilians, not military.”

Carter leaned forward. “I think a few words from you directly on the subject would go a long way, sir.”

“We could try to arrange for a staggered day off too, so each team gets one day a week where they’re not on duty unless we’re in a battle situation.”

“That sounds reasonable to me.”

“Master Chief, your thoughts?”

“That works for me too, sir.”

“Excellent.” Kenneth smiled. “Where are we at with turnover and training for the military engineering crew?”

“It’s going slowly. They’ve only been onboard for a couple of months now. Our team has spent years working this ship,” Carter said.

Kenneth nodded. “I want you to move our teams to a role of showing the military crew how to do it once, then stepping back and letting them fumble their way through the repair or upgrade, only interjecting themselves if asked.”

“Okay…but won’t that take a lot more time?” Billings asked.

“Yes, it will. But at some point, we’ll no longer be on the ship. It’s vital that the green suiters understand how to do this work.”

“You got it, boss.”

“Oh, I’ve meant to ask…” Kenneth pointed to a wooden desk plaque that had appeared on his desk in the middle of the night. It read *El Director—Kenneth Lowe*. “Who was behind this?”

“Uhhhhh….” Billings stammered.

“Joshua?” David asked.

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“Should I pull the door logs?”

The two men looked at each other again. “It was a group effort,” Carter said. “All of the leads put in together for it, and we had it delivered on the last supply run.”

Kenneth laughed loudly. “That’s awesome. Well, I love it, so it’s staying put. Alright, guys, let’s get back to work.”

5

September 11th, 2460
CSV *Lion of Judah*
CDF Resupply Depot Delta Hotel Four

"Looks like we're getting more Hunter missiles than usual this time around," Ruth said as she reviewed the munitions resupply manifest from her console.

David nodded with satisfaction. "Three hundred Hunters in a total resupply of eight hundred missiles isn't shabby, Lieutenant." Hunter missiles were always in short supply, as they utilized an advanced artificial intelligence package to allow them to penetrate League point defense systems easily. They represented the best offensive missile system that either side deployed.

"This system of forward supply depots is quite interesting to me, Colonel," Aibek said as he watched the resupply operation with interest. "Leapfrogging repair ships and mobile drydocks with the fleet, coupled with numerous resupply vessels is intriguing."

David smiled. “Well, it’s said that professionals deal with logistics. Without resupply, we’d be unable to fight. There’s a lot of folks that spend their entire careers planning deep space logistical missions. I’m just thankful that our respective militaries have been able to work together so far to make it all happen.”

“I think I would die of boredom if my job consisted of moving pieces of equipment from one place to another,” Aibek quipped. “I am a warrior.”

Ruth turned around in her chair to look back at the two of them. “Armies march on their stomachs, XO. If you don’t believe that, go to the crew mess and see the near riot that breaks out if chow is late.”

David laughed out loud. “Some things never do change.”

Taylor interrupted their bantering. “Conn, communications. I have a video link request from General MacIntosh for you, sir. It’s marked for your eyes only.”

“Pipe it to my day cabin, Lieutenant. I’ll take the vidlink there. XO, you have the conn.”

“This is the XO, I have the conn,” Aibek intoned; after a couple of months on the *Lion*, he had become well-versed in CDF procedures and had taken to them quite well.

David walked out of the bridge and into the passageway that led to the gravlift. He removed his cover as he crossed the threshold of the bridge and acknowledged the salutes of the two marine guards that perpetually stood watch outside of the hatch. It was only a few more steps to his day cabin, which served as his office and a rack in which to grab some sleep during combat situations that lasted for long periods of time. He slid into the chair behind his desk, which was adorned with numerous mementos from his career, and used his fingerprint to unlock the tablet locked into the docking station. A moment later, its screen snapped on with an active vidlink request from General MacIntosh.

David pressed the button on the screen marked *Activate Video Link,* and a moment later, MacIntosh's face appeared on the screen. "Good morning, Colonel."

"Good morning to you too, sir."

"How's your resupply going?"

"Very well, sir. We should be finished later today and ready to rejoin the fight." *There's no way he spent all the communication credits required for a vidlink to see if we're getting resupplied on time*.

"There's a week-long pause on the advance while we conduct ship repairs and bring up new pilots and replacement small craft. The announcement will go out later this morning in official orders."

"I see, sir. Does that mean the *Lion* will have a different assignment?" David asked.

"Quite perceptive of you, Colonel. Yes, I have a small errand for you to run. I'm sure you've read about how the neutral planets that border our space and the League's invasion of our galactic arm have been a proxy for the overall conflict?"

"Yes, sir, I have. We try to keep as many of them on our side as we can and convince them to join the Terran Coalition wherever possible."

"That's been a hard sell the last few years. Most of those planets have been drifting toward the League's orbit. I think we've got an opportunity to change that now with the recent victories. Nothing helps the cause of getting people to switch horses mid-race than seeing the one they were betting on fall down in a heap."

David cracked a smile at MacIntosh's analogy; the old Scotsman had a way with words. "Quite, sir."

"I want you to proceed to Monrovia and make contact with its government."

“I’m not familiar with that planet, sir. I assume it's on the border?” David questioned.

“It was on the old border. Now it’s firmly within what we would call Terran Coalition controlled space. However, we're cautious about making sure the neutral planets understand that we’re not taking them over. We’d like for them to come to see the light and join us, but the Senate passed a bill by two-thirds majority yesterday, reaffirming the Terran Coalition’s commitment to freedom of self-determination for all neutral, human-controlled planets. A group of American and British settlers that didn’t feel the constitution of the Terran Coalition was right for them founded Monrovia, all the way back in 2238. Specifically, they have a clause in their constitution that outlaws the government from taking a position on religious belief in any way,” MacIntosh explained at length.

David pondered as the general spoke, trying to recall reading about the planet in school; but it was so long ago. Many facts just escaped his remembrance. “And they’ve been leaning toward the League in recent years?”

“Yes. There used to be robust economic ties between the Terran Coalition and Monrovia, but over the last couple of years, they’ve been doing a lot of trading with the League, and they’ve received some surplus League military hardware. Your mission will be to fly the flag; convince their government of our newfound combat abilities, and use the soft power we maintain, namely trading ties, to bring them closer in line with our side.”

“Sir, with respect, wouldn’t this mission be more suited for a diplomatic team? I’m a ship driver, sir.”

“The Department of Diplomatic Affairs and the president went back and forth on that, Colonel. In the end, intelligence estimates suggest that Monrovia’s primary motivation in gravitating toward the League is they feel they’re more likely

to win the war and are a stronger power. The *Lion* and her recent success should tilt that opinion. I want you to pull out all the stops, invite the prime minister and his cabinet onboard, throw a state dinner, hell… give them a tour of anything on the ship that's not classified. Do whatever it takes to succeed."

"Yes, sir," David said in a crisp, confident tone. "We'll get it done."

"Good. I'm hoping you can show us your diplomatic skills on this one. There's more to being a successful capital ship commander than being able to win in combat. The mark of a true strategist is being able to win without firing a shot."

David's face curled into a grin. "I see you had to read Sun Tzu as well, sir."

MacIntosh smirked. "You know, that works on most of my officers. They think I'm a fount of wisdom."

"Well, sharing the wisdom of the masters of our craft never goes out of style. I try to do the same with those under my command."

"Speaking of those under your command, how is your senior team shaking out?"

David immediately determined that MacIntosh was asking about Colonel Aibek. "The team is working well together, sir. I'm very pleased with the Saurian you picked as my XO. I can't ask for anything more from him. He's integrated himself well into the crew and earned their respect."

"That's what I was hoping for, Colonel. I've been monitoring your reports closely… what I said a few months back still holds. The *Lion of Judah* is leading the way on this integration experiment we've got going. Between Lieutenant Colonel Aibek and Admiral Kartal, we're well on our way to success."

“I’m trying not to let my hopes get too far ahead of the reality on the ground, but our outlook is so much better than it was six months ago,” David pursed his lips together in a rueful expression. “I had gotten to the point where I thought we were just buying time until the end.”

MacIntosh nodded, a thoughtful expression gracing his face. “I never gave up hope, mostly because of how strongly I believed in the Victory Project. But I’d be lying if I said I thought we’d be sweeping the League ahead of us, straight out of our arm of the galaxy.”

David grinned. “I’m looking forward to attaching a broom to our ship when we come back to Canaan’s station after we finish driving the League out. I’ll get out on the hull in a space suit myself and glue it on.”

“I’ll help you do it once we’ve earned the right for that particular celebration, Colonel. Now, you’ve got your orders. When can you get underway to Monrovia?”

“Is 0800 CMT tomorrow too late, sir?”

“No, that will be fine, Colonel. Good luck, take care and Godspeed. MacIntosh out.”

The screen faded to black as the vidlink cut out. David leaned back in his chair, thinking about the *Lion*’s newest assignment. *Diplomacy, not something I’ve really done before. But the general’s right; a capital ship commander is the representative of the Terran Coalition out on the frontier and is expected to handle military as well as diplomatic missions. At least I have a great team to call on in the crew of this ship. Together, we’ll get through it.*

David sprang up from the chair and pulled down his uniform shirt and the sweater over it. He decided to go back to the bridge and call a briefing of the senior staff; getting everyone in the right frame of mind would be crucial to the success of their latest assignment.

Later that afternoon, David had requested Angie's presence in his day cabin, both to brief her on the upcoming mission and to discuss how his interview was presented. *This business of having to sell the press on our activities…ugh. I much preferred my only interaction with the media being tossing my tablet across the room when some talking head trashed the military and said we were child killers*. When her smiling face appeared in the middle of the hatch, he realized that she was always punctual, a trait he much appreciated.

David stood. "Come in, Ms. Dinman."

"Thank you, Colonel Cohen."

"Please, have a seat," David said, gesturing to the chairs; he sat after she did.

"What can I do for you, Colonel?"

"Well, we're about to undertake a different type of mission, and I wanted to make you aware of it."

"Oh?"

"We're being sent to Monrovia for a port call and consultations with their leadership."

"Ah, one of the neutral planets that's fallen out of our orbit. It makes sense to send the new symbol of Terran Coalition might to get them back into line."

David grimaced. "That is not our intent. Simply to fly the flag and let them know we're here and able to help defend their right to exist as an independent planet. As you know, we've pledged to uphold the independence of all neutral worlds, and that's a promise we back up with force."

"But one that isn't always honored. There are certainly times when the Terran Coalition is unable to defend neutral planets… or our own, for that matter."

"I'll concede the point."

“It also seems that planets with strong trade relationships with us or natural resources we need to build ships and weapons somehow jump to the top of the list for protection.”

“I’m sure the planners back on Canaan weigh all aspects when deciding how to allocate our limited military force,” David said neutrally.

“You seriously think we do what we do out here for altruistic reasons, Colonel?”

“I think that we generally do the right things for the right reasons as a people.”

“Rose-colored glasses, I see.”

“I could say that you’re needlessly cynical.”

“Goes with the job.”

David laughed. “You should have stayed in the service. You’d fit in well with the Marines.”

“Will there be any press availability when you talk to the Prime Minister of Monrovia?”

“If we get a formal sit down, of course. Not the initial contact, though.”

Angie nodded. “Is there anything else, Colonel?”

“I did want to discuss the interview you did with me after we destroyed the *Tours*.”

“I told you, I wasn’t going to give you input on it before I aired the piece, Colonel. I must maintain my impartiality.”

“I understand,” David said, trying to soften his voice. “I simply wanted to compliment you on it. I didn’t agree with every cut and take, but I thought you did a good job of presenting a fair and balanced look at the ship.”

Angie looked surprised for a moment, then smiled. “In that case, I’ll take your compliment in the spirit it seems to be offered and thank you for agreeing to the discussion.”

“Maybe we’ll do it again sometime,” David replied.

“Once we do something newsworthy again, sure.”

“I doubt much will happen that’s newsworthy, as you put it, on Monrovia. But who knows… we’ll see.”

“That we will, Colonel. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get ready to file my daily update.”

“Of course, Ms. Dinman,” David said as he stood up.

Angie stood and made eye contact with him. “Good day, Colonel.”

David watched her walk out of his office and shook his head. *Can’t figure out what her angle is yet*, he thought. *Maybe she’s just trying to do a good job and present the facts. That would be a very welcome change.*

6

DAVID HAD PLANNED the *Lion*'s final jump to Monrovia for execution during the middle of the first watch, ensuring that he and the core bridge crew would be rested and prepared. He'd found that one of the harder things in ship operations was to time engagements so that the A-players were ready to go; while the second and third watch crews were competent, they weren't quite to the same level as the first watch, which had more experience. A diplomatic mission, though, was far easier to plan out.

Space tore itself open in a shower of multi-colored particles and the *Lion of Judah* neatly glided out of the artificial wormhole it had created to bridge the points between its previous location and the planet. David still marveled, after all these years, at the technology required to make faster-than-light travel possible. So far, every race they had encountered possessed similar technology, but there was speculation that there were other ways to achieve FTL travel, none of which were yet proven.

"Conn, navigation. Emergence from Lawrence drive jump within five hundred kilometers of the target," Hammond said.

“Good work, Lieutenant,” David replied, impressed with that level of precision across nearly fifty lightyears of space. “Communications, please signal Monrovia; they expect our presence.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Taylor said, going silent as he worked the controls on his console. “Sir, I have the prime minister’s office for you.”

“Put it on my personal viewer,” A moment later, the face and upper body of a neatly dressed human male popped onto the screen directly above David’s head.

“Colonel Cohen, I presume?” the man began, and in response to David’s nod, continued. “I am Sefton Garner, special assistant to Prime Minister Fitzroy, Unified Government of Monrovia. How can we be of assistance?”

“Thank you, Mr. Garner. I’m scheduled to have a discussion with the prime minister this morning via vidlink.”

Garner smiled widely. “Yes, Colonel. I have that all prepared. If you could wait a moment while I let the prime minister know you’re ready?”

“Of course,” David replied, his lips forming a smile on his own.

The video link snapped off, and David was left looking at a blank screen. “They seem pleasant enough,” Aibek said.

“Well, that’s his job, after all, XO.”

“Quite right. Perhaps the prime minister will be equally pleasant?”

“We live in hope.”

“Conn, communications! I have the prime minister for you, sir.”

David cleared his throat. “Put her on, Lieutenant.”

The smiling face of a human woman filled the viewer above David’s head. “Colonel Cohen! Such a pleasure to meet

you, even if it is by vidlink. Welcome to Monrovia! Allow me to introduce myself; Prime Minister Colleen Fitzroy."

"The pleasure is mine, Prime Minister," David said, remembering his briefing from MacIntosh about the proper use of diplomacy. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

"How could we turn down a request to discuss the state of affairs in the galaxy from our friends in the Terran Coalition?"

"Well, I believe we can always improve relations… especially with the recent changes in the balance of power."

Fitzroy laughed. "Is that an oblique reference to us moving closer to the League when it appeared they were going to win, Colonel?"

David smiled. "None was intended, Prime Minister."

"It's very true that the balance of power has dramatically shifted. It is also true that government policy takes time to develop and change. Monrovia has had a stated goal of no longer being under the thumb of either of the major human powers. We've made great strides toward that."

"The Terran Coalition simply hopes to work with your people to help them in any way we can, or barring that, be a good neighbor."

Fitzroy nodded. "A worthy goal, Colonel Cohen. But not one we can achieve overnight. Any steps toward that goal will be slow and steady."

"I understand, Prime Minister. May I suggest that we meet in person to discuss the situation? I was hoping to avail my crew of your famous hospitality with shore leave."

"I'd be happy to entertain you and your senior staff, Colonel. Unfortunately, we've had some civil unrest recently that will preclude shore leave for your ship at large. I'm sure you understand."

David raised an eyebrow at the mention of civil unrest. "I wasn't aware of those issues, Prime Minister, but of course

we understand. Should I work with your assistant to determine a time and location for talks?"

"That would be great, Colonel. I look forward to meeting you in the flesh, so to speak," Fitzroy said, giving off a radiant smile.

"Thank you, ma'am. We'll be in touch; *Lion of Judah* out."

The screen went dark, and David relaxed in his chair. "How'd we do for our first mission not blowing up League ships, XO?"

Aibek snorted. "We're not done here yet. Have I mentioned I detest politicians?"

"Only a few dozen times this week," David said in a tone of mock reproach.

"I'll try to work on that, sir."

"You do that, XO. Communications, contact the prime minister's assistant and let's nail down a time for our next meeting."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jacqueline Ericksen rolled out of bed as her alarm clock buzzed loudly, announcing that another day was upon her. A major in the Monrovian National Guard, she had a desk job on one of the largest military installations on the planet. Flying through her shower and putting on the uniform of the day, she was in the middle of making a bowl of cereal for herself when a soft vibrating from under the table jolted her out of the usual morning routine. She reached under the table and pulled the communication device from where it was taped to the bottom of the wood, lifting it to her ear.

"It's a lovely day in the forest," Erickson said into the comm.

“As it always is after a rain,” the disembodied voice on the other end of the call replied, the proper code phrase in return to hers.

“Do you have orders for me?”

“Yes. We’ve confirmed that the Terran Coalition vessel is in orbit. Your mission is to send the transmission to it, as previously agreed.”

Ericksen’s heart tightened in her chest. *I always knew that this day would come because of my position, but I was hoping I’d have more time, or something would change and our leaders would see the light. Too late now for second-guessing.* “I understand. Will I have any assistance?”

“We’ve got an asset on the inside that will help you. He’ll make contact in the communications room on base. We’ve manipulated the turnover schedule today, so they’ll be short by two technicians. Between the two of you, I expect you’ll be able to neutralize the remaining technician and send the transmission before the nearest military police contingent arrives,” the synthesized voice answered.

“Is there an egress route?”

After a pregnant pause on the line, the voice replied, “After getting the message out, take local transport off the base. Onsite security personnel should be confused enough not to realize what’s going on.”

That’s absolute BS, and we both know it. “Roger that. What time am I meeting my contact?”

“0930 hours. He’ll be in a green shirt and will use the code phrase ‘Nighttime is peaceful, isn’t it?’”

“I’ll be there,” Ericksen said, forcing the panic from her voice.

“I know this isn’t going to be easy. But it’s the only chance we’ve got left to get help. Good luck. Walk with God,” the voice said with finality.

“Make it count, whoever in the hell you are,” Ericksen said as she hung up the comm. Clearing the cache on the device and erasing its data while she walked to her kitchen sink, she retrieved two bottles of chemicals from under it and poured them into the basin before tossing in the communications link. Mixed together, they formed a highly potent acid that would break down the plastic and metal within to the point it couldn’t be pieced back together—*nothing for the secret police to trace back.*

Turning around from the sink, she paused in front of a picture of her husband Gordan and herself on their wedding day. A tear formed in her eye as she fought back emotion; she found a piece of a paper and a pen to write with.

Gordan,

Whatever happens today, whatever you hear, know that I love you more than anything and that what I do, I do to save us all. Destroy this note, and I pray someday I will see you again in paradise.

– Your loving wife, Jackie

The letter written, she left it on the spot that he always dropped his commlink and wallet, confident that he would find it. *And it shouldn’t cast any suspicion on him if the secret police find it before he does.* Before leaving the house, she retrieved her military-issued sidearm and put it into a holster on the small of her back under her uniform. The task completed, she walked out of the house she had shared with her husband for the last five years for what was likely the last time.

Ericksen slid into her automated car, punching in the military base where she worked as a destination. After backing the car out of the driveway and putting into autopilot mode, she sat back with nothing else to do but think. Monrovia wasn’t large enough to justify the infrastructure behind helicars, and so only the very rich and

powerful had those. Ordinary citizens had to sit in traffic, and she was no exception.

Reflecting on the task ahead of her, Ericksen recited her favorite passage from the Bible as her electric car zipped through the streets. “Therefore, put on the whole armor of God,” she said, “that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, stand.” Closing her eyes, she finished with a prayer. “God, help me today, give me the strength to do what I need to do, the faith to see it through, and the ability to accomplish my goal if it is your will. Amen.”

She sat quietly in the car through the rest of the drive, fighting down nerves and second thoughts, until the car rolled to a stop at the front gate of the military installation she was traveling to. A young soldier held out a hand scanner as she lowered the driver's side window.

“If you would, Major,” he said in a respectful tone.

Ericksen placed her hand on the scanner, and a moment later, her identity was confirmed. *As long as they aren’t actively scanning vehicles and see my sidearm*, *I’m home free*. The private pulled the scanner back and quickly snapped off a salute, while simultaneously triggering the gate to open. She drove through the open lane, and the gate lowered down behind her, the next car’s occupant going through the same process.

The car stopped and parked itself in an open space; suddenly, it was time to act. Ericksen opened the door and stepped out of her vehicle. She walked with purpose into the building that housed the central communications systems and the uplink they would use to talk to the CDF ship in orbit. *That’s the plan anyway*.

A voice from behind her startled her, causing her to whirl around. “Nighttime is peaceful, isn’t it, Major?”

Ericksen sized up the man that stood in front of her; he appeared to be in civilian attire and wore a green shirt as her handler said he would. “Yes, it is,” she said quietly. “Are you ready?”

The man nodded. “Tanned, tested, and ready, Major. Staff Sergeant Ennis Fuller, at your service.”

Ericksen nodded herself and walked off toward the area of the building that housed the uplink. Fuller fell in beside her. “Don’t let the shirt fool you, Major. I’m special operations certified. Decided it might be suspicious to have two uniforms they aren’t expecting suddenly walk in. I’m your civilian contractor today.”

The smooth assurance in Fuller’s voice, if nothing else, calmed her. Tier one operators were like human machines; whatever else could be said about them, she knew he’d do whatever it took to get the job done, including the sacrifice of his own life if it was required.

It took a few minutes to traverse the distance between the entryway to the building and the communication room that housed the transmitter. Ericksen spent that time mute, her heart pounding in her chest as she tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. Confronted by a security door that separated the wing they were trying to access, she walked up to it casually and pressed her index finger into the scanner; a second later, the door’s lock clicked open, and they both walked through.

“Uh, Major, tailgating isn’t allowed. That gentleman will need to scan in as well,” a young technician said to them as they walked in.

Ericksen smiled. “I’m escorting a contractor, Private.”

As the technician began to speak, Fuller brought his hand down on the man’s neck in a martial arts move, delivering a stunning blow. He quickly put the young man in a chokehold

and squeezed until he stopped moving; it was over in a matter of seconds.

"He's out cold," Fuller said as Ericksen walked behind a console and got to work.

After keying in the proper commands and inserting the data drive containing the precious information the resistance had been able to gather, she was ready to execute. "Here goes nothing," she commented with something approaching a smile, then brought her hand down and pressed the enter key.

All hell broke loose; alarm klaxons wailed, and a red light outside of the security door blinked. "Whiskey tango foxtrot, Major? Did you do it wrong?" Fuller asked while drawing his sidearm and racking the action.

"They must have changed the security protocols," Ericksen said, her voice high-pitched and full of fear.

Fuller turned around and walked over to her, grabbed her by the shoulders, and shook her. "Look, get it together, Major. You've got one job here: send that transmission. We clear on that?"

Ericksen nodded her head despite her hands shaking in terror. "Yes." *I was a supply officer, not a combatant.*

"Now, you got picked because you had the right clearance, and you know how to use these things, right?"

Ericksen nodded hesitantly.

"Look, I'm a grunt. I'm going to stop the men coming here to prevent us from doing our task. You are going to finish this no matter what. Okay?" Fuller said to her in what she could tell was his attempt at being soothing.

"I'll do my best," Ericksen finally said, forcing herself to think about the problem and not the fear.

"Okay," Fuller said, releasing his hold on her shoulders and turning back toward the door. "You stay put. I'm going to deal with the first wave, which ought to be a couple of

rent-a-cop contractors that your dog could handle without breaking a sweat."

Something about Fuller's easy-going attitude, even in the face of what appeared to be certain death, disarmed Ericksen's fear. *I bet we'd be friends if we'd met before this. He seems like a decent guy*. There was a trio of reports that sounded to her like a standard-issue sidearm. As she continued to input commands into the computer system, Fuller walked back into the room carrying a couple of rifles and a handful of magazines.

"Somebody got the rent-a-cops battle rifles. They should have invested in better armor," he said with a cocky grin. "The next round, on the other hand, will be a bit more difficult. The base's rapid reaction force should take a couple of minutes to get here, but they'll know what they're doing."

Ericksen looked up from her attempts to access the communication network. "Is anyone else coming to help us?"

Fuller shook his head. "I was supposed to have three more operators with me, but our prime minister's finest arrested them two days ago."

"Do you think they knew we were planning this?" Ericksen asked hesitantly.

"I doubt it. Otherwise, there would have been an army here. No, they got lucky... but I'll tell you this. It'll take a lot more than Fitzroy's goons to get my guys to talk. They'd die first. Now, how is it coming?"

"I'm getting there. There's a new security protocol for using the transmitter. I've got to remember how to do real work," Ericksen said with a forced grin.

"Keep pushing. I'll deal with the hostiles," Fuller said as he stepped back out into the corridor that lay beyond the security door, battle rifle up and at the ready.

As Ericksen worked, there were bursts of gunfire, jolting her from her task, but after the first couple of interruptions, she realized that from somewhere deep inside, nerves of steel had taken over. Breaking past the first lockout, she glanced up as Fuller thrust the door open. He quickly stepped through, then turned around long enough to fire a long burst that felled the soldier pursuing him.

"Well, that was fun," he said, panting and quickly reloading his rifle. "Good news… they're down four shooters. Bad news… they've got eight more out there. How close are you?"

"I'll be ready to open a channel momentarily."

"Okay, I'll hold them off as long as I can. Are you armed?"

Ericksen nodded, reaching behind and drawing the sidearm she had in a holster in the small of her back. "Standard issue 10mm sidearm. I shoot marksman every year," she said with pride.

"Yeah, you'll get a chance to try that out against real people that shoot back. Not as easy as it looks."

The door swinging open interrupted the back and forth; a soldier in full combat gear loomed in the entryway, but Fuller was quick. Before Ericksen could even send the command to her hand to raise the sidearm she held, he had shot the man three times in center mass. The soldier crumpled to the floor in a heap, but there were more beyond. He stepped to one side, braced the battle rifle to his shoulder, and leaned out, firing short bursts that killed several more of the advancing team.

Ericksen screamed as bullets slapped the wall behind her and one grazed her shoulder. Trying to drown out the battle, she focused on sending the last command to the system that would initiate a communications link with the Coalition Defense Force ship in orbit above.

DAVID WAS in the middle of reviewing an engineering readiness report on the bridge of the *Lion of Judah*, when Taylor interrupted his thoughts. "Conn, communications. I'm receiving a transmission from the surface, sir. It appears to be from a member of the Monrovian National Guard. It's garbled, but definitely directed at us."

"Well, that's a bit peculiar," David said toward Aibek, who nodded his large Saurian head. "Lieutenant, put it through to my viewer."

The flat-paneled monitor above David's chair snapped on, the picture showing a blonde woman holding a sidearm in a classic shooter's stance. "This is Major Jacqueline Ericksen calling the CDF ship in orbit, come in!"

"Major, this is Colonel David Cohen, CSV *Lion of Judah*. How can we be of assistance?"

Shouts, screams, and gunfire sounded in the background of the transmission as Ericksen looked down into the camera. "Colonel, I don't have a lot of time. I'm transmitting you a message that contains evidence of what's happening on Monrovia. The important part is you can't believe what the government tells you."

"I don't follow, Major. What's going on?"

"Some time ago, the government decided on a plan that was approved by a planet-wide referendum to join the League of Sol. As I'm sure you know, the League requires that all citizens pledge allegiance only to the government and to renounce any belief in a higher power. Those of us that wouldn't comply have been systematically rounded up and imprisoned."

As David began to form the words to reply, a burst of gunfire was heard through the commlink. A male voice shouted, "I can't hold them back much longer!"

“There’s not much time left, Colonel. We need the Terran Coalition’s help. Our resistance movement formed too late and has been largely ineffective. They’ve rounded up everyone: Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Muslim… hell, they arrested agnostics for a while if they wouldn’t pledge loyalty. It’s all in the data file. They’re supposedly reeducating those that they rounded up, but any who refuse to give in will be executed. Please, Colonel, save us. The Terran Coalition is our last hope.”

“Major, if you’ll give me your position, I can get a shuttle of Marines down there in fifteen minutes,” David said, his face a mask of anger. *Not on my watch.*

“It’s no use, Colonel. We’re in the middle of one of the most heavily protected military installations on the planet. This was a one-way trip. We’ve just got to hold out for another…” Ericksen’s voice cut off as a series of shouts, and an explosion occurred off camera; gunshots rang out from close to the microphone, which David assumed was her sidearm yet again. A second later, he heard a woman’s scream, followed by a final gunshot. Moments later, the feed cut off.

“Did that just happen?” David asked, staring at Taylor. “Can we confirm the transmission was legitimate?”

“Well, sir, it came from a military installation on Monrovia. I can’t confirm the veracity of the information, of course.”

“It looked real to me, sir,” Aibek said with what looked like a concerned look for a Saurian on his face, at least in David’s brief knowledge of Saurian expressions.

“Did we get the information transmission she was talking about?” David asked.

“It was cut off mid-transmission, sir. I’ll try to put it back together.”

“You do that, Lieutenant. XO, assemble the senior staff, including Doctor Hayworth and Major Merriweather, in the conference room in thirty minutes. I want to discuss our options.”

“Sir, should we contact the government and ask them what’s going on?” Aibek asked.

“No, not until we’ve had a chance to review what Lieutenant Taylor puts together and discuss the situation among ourselves.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get everyone together.”

“Thank you, XO,” David said, closing his eyes for a moment before standing. “XO has the conn,” David walked off the bridge, pulling his cover off as he passed the threshold to the passageway beyond. *There’s no way in God’s green universe I’m going to allow a planet to round up and execute millions of believers; we pledged a long time ago that it would never happen again. Whatever it takes, we will stop this, so help me God.*

7

Thirty minutes later, David sat at the head of the conference table, surrounded by the senior officers of the *Lion of Judah*. Aibek, Hanson, Doctor Tural, and Ruth all sat to his right, while Taylor, Amir, and Major Elizabeth Merriweather sat to the left. He glanced at his watch, then at Merriweather. "Major, does Doctor Hayworth not understand the meaning of being on time?"

Merriweather grimaced. "I apologize, sir. I'll go get him."

Her move to stand was abruptly cut off by the hatch swinging open and Hayworth walking into the room. "I apologize, a test I was observing ran long."

"Have a seat, Doctor," David said icily. After the doctor had complied, he continued. "Approximately thirty minutes ago, we received a transmission from the surface of Monrovia. A person who identified herself as a major in the Monrovian National Guard claimed that the government is rounding up people of faith, forcing them into re-education camps, and executing them if they refuse to renounce their beliefs. I don't think I need to tell each and every one of you that I won't let that go unanswered if it's true."

Shocked looks filled the faces of all those who hadn't been on the bridge, opened mouths and gasps. "It's the 25th

century…" Hanson said. "Monrovia's a neutral planet made up of people that escaped Earth and fled with our ancestors. How could they possibly do this?"

David shook his head. "We don't know if they did or not, Major. But I aim to find out conclusively, one way or another. This could be a false flag operation designed to get us to lose our heads and hastily intervene. It could be a legitimate request for help. We need to determine which it is and quickly."

"Along those lines, sir, I've been able to piece together the information we received from the data burst from the planet. Unfortunately, most of it was corrupted and lost during transmission," Taylor said. "Including the location of these camps."

Aibek snorted. "Somewhat convenient."

"Lieutenant Goldberg, I'm aware of the limitations of our tactical sensor suite in pinpointing locations on a planetary body. Can you think of a way for us to quickly survey the planet?" David asked.

Before Ruth could answer, Hayworth spoke. "Tactical sensors aren't capable of searching for what amounts to a concentration camp while in orbit, Colonel. What you need is imaging data from the entire planet and to run it through an algorithm to look for specific oddities in the data. It stands to reason that these camps would have unique features, such as rows of similar buildings, fencing, and guard towers."

Ruth's face flushed. "I'd have to agree with the doctor, sir. We lack the facilities for that on the *Lion*."

"Actually, Lieutenant," Hayworth said, again interrupting. "We do have the capability. At my repeated insistence, this ship has a full suite of scientific sensors and imaging equipment. We can use that to capture information on the entire planet and run it in real time through the *Lion*'s supercomputer. I'll write an algorithm to search for

anomalies, and we can assemble a team to review hits. I'll be happy to lead this effort, in case you were looking for someone to do that," he finished, flashing a confident smile in David's direction.

Well, that was different., David was completely surprised by Hayworth's tone and seemingly sincere desire to help. "Thank you, Doctor. I'd be glad to have your assistance. Is three hours enough time to scan the planet's surface?"

"I'm honestly not sure, Colonel. It will depend on how long it takes me to create an effective algorithm. Could you settle for an update in three hours?"

"Yes, that'll work. Anything else, people?" Met with silence, David stood. "Okay, let's get back to work and sort this out. Dismissed." As they all jumped up, David added, "Doctor Hayworth, please stay behind for a moment. I want a word."

The rest of the team filed out, leaving David alone with Hayworth. Both men eyed each other, but Hayworth spoke first. "Keeping me behind to chide me for my attitude, Colonel?" he asked.

"No, Doctor. I've accepted that you're an arrogant prick that delights in insulting others," David said, his voice taut. "I just want to know why you're so eager to help sort this out."

"My ego doesn't write checks that it can't cash, Colonel," Hayworth said smugly. "I want to know what's going on because I abhor tactics that go against basic human dignity. As I've told you before, regardless of my lack of religious beliefs, I want the Terran Coalition to win, and more importantly, if I see a group of people being oppressed and I can do something to help... I will."

David furrowed his brow. "That sentiment is something I didn't expect to hear from you."

"Why? Because to be good, you need to be religious?"

David shrugged. “I won’t lie; I tend to believe that if you believe in God or a higher power of some sort, you’re more inclined to be a decent person if for no other reason than the fear of what might happen to you in the next life.”

“In other words, you’re scared of being punished, so you do good things?”

“I’m not, personally. Though I consider it to be a maxim that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”

“Proverbs. You like quoting that book, don’t you?”

David smiled. “I suppose I do, Doctor.”

Hayworth’s expression softened. “Colonel, I realize you don’t like me very much. Eliza tells me regularly that I bring most of the dislike directed at me on myself, and I won’t deny that. To use your colorful words, I’m an arrogant prick. But this arrogant prick has invented a technology that very well may win the war, and I hate the League of Sol. Isn’t that enough?”

David paused, realizing that Hayworth was offering as much of an olive branch as he was likely ever to see. “We’re both direct men, Doctor. I appreciate that about you. Honestly, I was happy you’re willing to step forward and help with this problem. But may I offer you the advice that you’d catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?”

“I’m not interested in making friends, nor in what others think of me, Colonel. I have one goal: the advancement of science. Along the way, I wouldn’t mind convincing someone that science governs all we see around us, and the beauty of being the one in a trillion random chance.”

“Again, Doctor, I may not agree with you, but I respect your right to believe whatever it is you will. All I ask is that you further the goals of the Terran Coalition while you’re on my ship, and keep the condescension to a minimum,” David said with a trace of a thin smile.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Hayworth looked toward the door. “If you don’t mind, Colonel, I’ve got an algorithm to write and a concentration camp to find.”

David nodded. “Carry on, Doctor Hayworth.”

Martin Attwood stood outside of the prime minister’s office in the centralized government capital complex on Monrovia. As the deputy prime minister, he had served in this government for several years, through good times and bad. Now it seemed if the rumors he had heard on his way over to an emergency meeting were correct, things were about to go from bad to worse.

“The prime minister will see you now, Mr. Attwood,” the ever-debonair assistant to Prime Minister Fitzroy said.

“Thank you, Sefton.”

Attwood strode through the ornate doors to the office that lay beyond. Colleen Fitzroy sat behind the lone desk in the room, staring at an electronic tablet. “Come in, Marty.”

I so detest that nickname; I think that’s why she uses it. “How bad is it?” Attwood asked without preamble.

“Pretty bad,” Fitzroy said as she stood up from the desk and walked around to a chair next to the couch. “A couple of traitors in the military used their access to send a message to the *Lion of Judah*. Intelligence isn’t sure how much information made it up there, but it’s bad. Worst case, the Terran Coalition knows of our re-education program.”

“Colleen… I’ve been giving this a lot of thought.”

“And you think we should stop the program and let everyone go?”

“Yes! I agree, it made sense six months ago to join the League. But now the League’s being pushed back. We both

know we'd get a better deal living under the Terran Coalition."

Fitzroy looked out the window wistfully. "Maybe. But we're too far in now. If they ever find out what we've done, they'll invade our planet and convert us all."

"If we stop now, it won't be too bad."

"Right, because we haven't executed everyone yet? Marty, you've got a kind soul. I like that about you, and you won me a couple of seats I needed. But you've got cotton balls between your ears if you think we can walk away and say, 'Oops, sorry; everyone's free to go.' You don't think that, do you?"

How did this all begin? The first step seemed so innocuous… then the restrictions started, and it got worse and worse until each step blended together. "Then we resign. Allow a new government to come in and clean up the mess."

"You can't be serious," she said, her jaw dropping open.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. The Terran Coalition is hesitant to involve itself in the actions of neutral planets. So we stay neutral and continue to deal with our religious citizenry problem. As long as they didn't get the location of the camps, we'll be fine. And even if they did, I doubt their government would authorize anything that hurts us. Sanctions maybe? But who cares about that… we already get most of our trade in with the League. In time, the League will shift more forces over to this side of the arm and beat the CDF and RSN back. Then we'll join them for good."

"I don't think that's the right thing to do," Attwood said forcefully.

"And what is? We resign, apologize, and beg for forgiveness? I don't think so. You're welcome to do that if you'd like, but if I were you, I'd consider what we do to traitors."

She owns me, lock, stock, and barrel. And I don't have what it takes to stand up to her or any of them. I've gotten this far by just going along with the majority, even though I know it's wrong, I'll do now to save my skin. "No, that won't be necessary."

"Good. Then get over to the intelligence bureau and make sure they're pulling out all the stops. We must find the rest of these traitors in our midst. This has gone on long enough. I want every member of the military put through a lie detector test if that's what it takes."

"Yes, ma'am," Attwood stood. "I'll update you later once I've met with the director in internal intelligence and security."

"Thank you, Marty. Just remember, someday we'll go down in history as the leaders that saved our planet. I'm looking forward to being remembered like that."

This science lab is large, cluttered, and full of equipment, David thought, looking around Doctor Hayworth's lab as he walked through the hatch into the space labeled "Science Lab A" on the door. Large towers of computer servers all interconnected to one another via cabling, and what looked like some sort of laser beam emitter was strapped onto a table. Hayworth, Taylor, and Merriweather sat at computer terminals in the back of the lab and didn't notice David until he was halfway across the room.

"Right on time, Colonel," Hayworth said. "You could almost set a watch by your punctuality."

Taylor and Merriweather both sprang up from their chairs and came to attention. David waved them off. "As you were."

Both relaxed and returned to their seats, while David pulled up a chair and sat in between them all. He looked over

at Hayworth and smirked. “That’s one thing the military does to you, Doctor. You learn to be on time.”

“Tell that to Eliza,” Hayworth said, drawing a look of ire from Merriweather.

“That’s Major Merriweather to you if you’re going to talk like that, Doctor.”

“So, what have we found out?” David interjected. *I don’t have time for banter today.*

“Well, sir, we’re in the process of finalizing our search, but I believe we can say with certainty several large installations are newly constructed.”

“Show me,” David commanded.

Taylor typed a few commands into his terminal, and a large holoprojection of the surface filled the room. The picture zoomed in to a grouping of long, rectangular buildings that appeared to have a wall around them, with ominous guard towers every one hundred meters. Taylor tapped another button and the perspective changed to a bird’s eye view.

“As you can see, there are large row houses here that we estimate can house three hundred people in each one. This particular camp has thirty of the row houses, with what appear to be medical facilities, an exercise yard, and other buildings. We assume that they’re for feeding the inmates.”

“It could just be a normal prison.”

“I don’t think so, Colonel,” Hayworth said, gesturing to one of the buildings. “We sent down a stealth drone to observe and take readings. These buildings are less than six months old, and multiple camps fit this same general profile. I don’t believe it’s plausible to say they’ve had an increase in felons by that kind of percentage.”

“It’s strong circumstantial evidence, Doctor. But it’s not overwhelming.”

“Our last survey just finished,” Merriweather interjected into the conversation. “Have a look.” She tapped a series of buttons on her terminal, and the holoprojection changed to show a three-dimensional view of the ground with a specific section off to the side of the camp, in a cross section that showed what was beneath.

David stared at it for a moment before he blurted out, “Are those bodies?”

Merriweather furrowed her eyebrows together. “Yes, sir. I believe we’re looking at a mass grave with at least eight hundred people in it.”

“Can you tell how they died?” David asked.

“No, sir. We’d need to exhume the grave to determine that.”

“Well, they sure as heck didn’t get there by accident,” Taylor said.

“Agreed, Lieutenant. There’s a part of me that can’t believe, in this day and age, an entire planet would decide to do this and apparently vote for it. But part of me isn’t surprised. People have traded rights for perceived throughout the generations. No different now.”

“What are we going to do about it, sir?” Taylor asked.

“Package all this up and put it into a written briefing for me, Lieutenant. I’m going to have a word with the government on Monrovia. We’ll see if they have an explanation. Then I’m going to present our findings back to HQ and General MacIntosh. I will argue for full-scale military intervention.”

“We’ve also been examining the Monrovian National Guard,” Merriweather piped up. “They’re far behind us, technologically speaking. They have stratofighters and armor corps, but they’re so far out of date compared to our equipment, I would believe our MEU is more than a match.”

David nodded. “That’s good info, Major. Make sure to put that in the written report; being able to tell the brass we can execute military action with few casualties will help the argument.” He turned toward Hayworth. “Doctor, thank you for taking point on this. The people in these camps are in your debt."

Hayworth stared straight back at David. “No debt, Colonel. I’m just… doing my job, as you military types would say.”

David cracked a smile. “Alright, Doctor, then I’ll just say we’re rubbing off on you.”

Hayworth snorted but didn’t reply further. David scanned the room as he stood. “Thank you all. I’ll look for that report in the next two hours. Carry on.”

“Yes, sir!” Merriweather crisply replied.

“Aye, sir!” Taylor said, right after her.

David nodded and turned toward the door, walking quickly to his next destination, his day cabin on deck one. *Let’s see what Prime Minister Fitzroy has to say for herself and her government. I don’t see any way there’s a rational explanation for this, but I’ll give her the courtesy of asking nicely… before I rain hell itself down on her planet.*

8

"He wants what?" Fitzroy said in an exasperated tone, perched behind her desk in the prime minister's office.

"He's demanding to speak to you about the treatment of religious persons on Monrovia, Madame Prime Minister," her aide, Sefton said.

Fitzroy said, her face red with anger, "Well, I guess they got enough to believe those damn traitors. Okay, put him through in five minutes. We'll make the man wait so he can remember who he's talking to."

During the five-minute period she had specified, she took the time to go over what she would say if confronted about the rebels. *It's none of their business how we run our planet; it's our planet, after all. The sanctimonious Terran Coalition has some gall, trying to tell us and the rest of the neutral worlds how to handle our affairs. The League is a better reflection of what our people believe. I hope we can play nice long enough to get this troublesome colonel on his way.*

David's image appearing on the monitor in front of her snapped Fitzroy out of her thoughts. "Colonel Cohen, what can I do for you?" she asked with a forced smile.

"You can start by telling me why you're detaining large amounts of your population in prison camps with mass

graves in them, Madame Prime Minister," David said without preamble, his brow furrowed and face red.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Colonel Cohen. Flinging accusations about like that is not the way for the Terran Coalition to demonstrate its friendship with Monrovia. I suggest you change your attitude, or you will no longer be welcome in orbit of our planet."

"I've got proof, Prime Minister. We have imaging of the prisons, eyewitness accounts, and ground-penetrating imagery of the mass graves."

Damn, they must have gotten more of the message than I thought. "The word of traitors that want to stoke conflict between our countries, against its elected government... surely, Colonel, you can't think that..." Fitzroy began before David cut her off.

"Madam Prime Minister, stow it. The science department on board the *Lion of Judah* took those images. We know, and very soon, the citizens of your planet, as well as the entire Terran Coalition will know, and the rest of the galaxy... exactly what you've done."

Rage built inside of Fitzroy as she watched David. *This smug, useless piece of crap telling me what he'll do to my planet? Who the hell does he think he is*? "And they'll do what exactly, Colonel?"

"I would hope to remove you from office and put you on trial for crimes against humanity, for starters."

Fitzroy, in spite of herself, laughed into the vidlink. "We voted on the course of action taken, Colonel Cohen. The vote was nearly seventy-five percent to twenty-five. That's what I would call a super-majority. We asked the Terran Coalition to take in those on Monrovia that don't share the same views as the vast masses of citizens regarding religion. I don't see you offering up that solution."

Fitzroy could almost feel David's eyes boring into her as he spoke again. "Prime Minister, I'm aware that our government was approached about taking in refugees of various religions from Monrovia. At no time were we told the reason you wanted to be rid of them was to perform what amounts to ethnic cleansing of all people of faith on your planet!"

"I don't care what you think about us, Colonel. Do you have anything else, or do you want to rant and rave some more?" Fitzroy said, forcing a fake smile back onto her face.

"No, Prime Minister… I don't have anything else for now. But I'll be back. I promise you that, and when I do, you'll regret the day you were born," David said. As soon as he finished, the screen abruptly went blank.

The doors to her office swung inward, and Attwood walked in. "Colleen, what do you think you're doing?" he practically shouted.

"Oh, shut up, Marty."

"Don't tell me to shut up. I just found out the Coalition Defense Force knows about our camps; they also seem to know about the mass graves!"

"Word travels fast, I see."

"Are you not fazed by this at all?"

"No. They're a paper tiger. Colonel Cohen just finished yelling at me. He'll go back and complain to his superiors, and that they'll tell him to be a good little boy and go on the next mission. Stop freaking out."

"This isn't going to end well, Prime Minister. It's not going to end well at all," Attwood said.

"Well, for all our sakes, I hope and believe that you're wrong. We'd better move up the timetable for re-education. I want a directive sent out to the paramilitary forces to hurry up. Anyone who won't comply should begin to receive enhanced education."

"You mean we should torture them?" Attwood said, calling out the euphuism embedded in the term "enhanced education."

"I don't care what we call it, Marty. We have to get it done. I don't like that we had to do this to our citizens, but we've been trying the carrot for years. Now they feel the stick. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Attwood grated out.

"Good. Get on it… I need to get with the League's ambassador. There's going to be complications from this activity."

Attwood nodded. "I'll update you later." He turned around and walked out of the room. Fitzroy stared at the door, considering the events of the past few minutes. *Everything will end up okay*, she thought. *At the end of the day, people take care of themselves, even the Terran Coalition. That will win out over everything else.*

SIMULTANEOUSLY ON THE bridge of the *Lion of Judah*, David abruptly stood up from the CO's chair, his face bright red as he wore a decidedly angry expression. "XO, you have the conn."

"Yes, sir, I have the conn," Aibek said.

"I'll be in my day cabin. Lieutenant Taylor, get me General MacIntosh on a gold priority channel, and patch him through."

Taylor peered over his console at David. "Sir, it's two A.M. on Canaan currently."

"I'm well aware of the time on Canaan, Lieutenant. Wake him up," David snapped.

"Yes, sir, right away."

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” David quickly turned on his heel and strode out off the bridge, removing his cover as he crossed the threshold to the passageway directly behind the bulkhead. It only took him fifteen steps to get to his day cabin, the computer automatically turning on the lights.

David sat down behind his desk and leaned back in the chair. *Emotion cannot be allowed to interfere with decision-making*. But he couldn’t help the fact that the entire situation made him furious. After all this time, after all the progress they’d made as a species, the idea that a group of humans—who had a democratically elected government—would choose to imprison and kill people because they didn’t like what they believed? *It’s things like this*, he reflected, *that make me wonder if the human race has evolved at all.*

“Colonel, I’ve got General MacIntosh on the vidlink for you, sir,” Taylor’s voice said from the ship’s intercom system.

“Very well, Lieutenant. Put him through to my tablet.”

“Yes, sir, wait one.”

David picked up the tablet off his desk and scanned his fingerprint. The screen turned on, and the vidlink engaged, with the decidedly unhappy face of General MacIntosh filling the device.

“Colonel, please tell me you have an excellent reason for waking me up at this hour.”

“I apologize for the late call, General. We’ve hit a serious roadblock with the Monrovians.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to get them back on our side in one trip, Colonel.”

“No, sir, but it’s far worse than we thought. We’ve learned from a group of political dissidents on the planet that the government is engaging in the systematic imprisonment, re-education, and extermination of all people of faith.”

MacIntosh sat back in his chair and squeezed his eyes open and closed several times. “I may be half asleep, but I think you just told me that a neutral planet is perpetrating a modern-day holocaust. If that’s what you said, do we have proof?”

“Yes, sir, we do. Doctor Hayworth was able to configure our scientific sensors to map the planet. We located and mapped several large camps and have ground-penetrating images of mass graves containing thousands of bodies,” David answered.

MacIntosh’s jaw fell open. “You got Hayworth to do that of his own accord?”

“Yes, sir. He wanted to run the team.”

“Miracles never cease to happen,” MacIntosh said with a wry smirk on his face. “Okay, we’ll pass this on to the department of state. Get our diplomatic team engaged and see if we can’t move the needle.”

David pursed his lips together, fighting down anger. “With respect, sir, I already spoke to the prime minister.”

“You what, Colonel?” MacIntosh barked.

“I spoke with the prime minister, sir. She acknowledged the camps, indicated that a supermajority of citizens voted to join the League, and she has no intention of stopping the practice.”

“You exceeded your authority, Colonel. Good Lord, are you trying to start another war?”

“Sir…” David stammered, realizing he was talking to his superior officer and a four-star general. *Oh, what the heck; go for it, David.* “With respect, sir, we can’t just stand by and let them murder God knows how many innocent people. We have a duty to intervene.”

“Well, where does that end, Colonel? If we don’t like that a neutral planet has permissive laws regarding drug use, should we invade them too? Maybe we should invade

Monrovia, convert them to Christianity, and plant our flag on the capital building."

"Sir, that's crazy. I'm suggesting we act to stop genocide. I don't care what the rest of their population does or doesn't do."

"I believe you, Colonel. But right now, we're in a precarious situation. Our military power is only strong thanks to our alliance with the Saurians. If the neutral planets turn against us, especially a group of them at the same time, we'll have enemies in our backyard. It's the policy of the Terran Coalition that we do not interfere in the government of other planets. That's been our policy for several generations. We're not the galaxy's policemen."

"If you were walking down the street and saw muggers attacking an old woman, would you step in to stop it?" David asked harshly.

"This isn't about you and me; it's about the policy of our government. We don't get to set that policy, Colonel. We execute it. And if you've never had to carry out an order you didn't agree with, then you probably lack an internal moral code."

"I can't believe that with your personal connection to President Spencer, you can't get him to see what's going on here. He's a good man; he'd want to help."

"You're probably right, but he has the well-being of two hundred billion people to worry about."

"So who cares about a few million that aren't even our citizens?" David said, his voice dripping acid.

"That's out of line, Colonel. Remember who you're talking to."

"Permission to speak freely then, sir."

"Granted."

"You're not the man I thought you were if you can stand aside while people are slaughtered for no other reason than

what they believe. We're in a war to defend our right to believe. We cannot pass by and ignore this. We blather on and on about how we're on God's side, and we do what's right, how we're better than the League because here freedom matters. Monrovia is so out of date technology-wise, our MEU could take the planet in a week! There's no reason not to help except we don't care."

MacIntosh bit his lip. "I'm going to choose to ignore that statement, Colonel, as I understand you're having an emotional response. Look, I want to help these people. I agree with you, but I can't commit the Coalition Defense Force to war without executive and legislative branch approval. You're talking about a declaration of war... that's not something we do lightly."

"No, it's not, and war isn't something we should ever do lightly. But when people are dying by the thousands, we cannot stand aside. If Monrovia had some mineral we needed, like lithium for our starships, you can bet your bottom credit the politicians would jump all over it. Getting involved is the right call, and if we're not the galaxy's policeman, who is then, sir? Because it needs one."

MacIntosh was silent for a moment and sat back in his chair. "You've got a point, Colonel."

"Then do something, sir. Don't we have any favors that can be called in with the private military corporations?"

"You know how much I hate those contractors playing war."

"Didn't say I liked them, sir. But even one of those outfits could wipe the floor of the Monrovian National Guard."

"Have you been asked to leave orbit yet?" MacIntosh asked.

"In as many words."

"Develop some problem with your Lawrence drive. I need a few hours, but I have an idea."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet. What I'm thinking is extremely high risk, and I'll still need presidential approval."

"We'll be standing by, sir."

"MacIntosh out."

The screen blinked out, leaving David alone in his cabin. *Oh boy, I just went off on my commanding officer*. MacIntosh did have a point. The Terran Coalition couldn't afford the bad optics of big footing the neutral planets, but they couldn't let this stand either. They vowed as a people when they'd escaped Earth that mass killings and genocide would never happen again. It couldn't start now, not in their space, and not on their watch.

David stood and forced his emotions down. He had a job to do; regardless of what happened here. *The best thing for me is to go about my duties and allow the general to keep his word. MacIntosh is a good man, and I know he'll do the right thing in the end*. Walking out of his cabin and back toward the bridge, he found himself very conflicted as to what to do next.

ANDREW MACINTOSH WALKED through the hallway of the Canaan Government Complex in his "A" uniform, as his destination was a conference room that contained, among others, the President of the Terran Coalition, Justin Spencer. The secretary of defense fell in beside him, matching his long strides.

"Mr. Secretary," MacIntosh said in greeting.

"Andrew, I read over your pre-brief."

"And you think I'm insane?"

"No. I'd personally like to bomb those smug assholes back into the stone age from orbit. That said, we have to adjust for the geopolitical realities of the situation. Declaring

war, staging a police action, or any other overt military acts against Monrovia is out of the question."

"I agree," MacIntosh said.

"Then what?"

"I've got a plan. Let me present it; then you can tell me if I'm relieved of command."

Dunleavy laughed. "You'd have to go nuts for that to happen, old friend. This pet project of yours has damn near won the war."

"We've got a long way to go before we win the war. But it's given us a chance, just like I said it would."

"Yes, I regret not believing in it now. If we had finished the *Lion of Judah* sooner, who knows?"

MacIntosh shook his head. "Everything seems to happen for a reason. The *Lion* arrived at the exact right moment, engaged the League at the right moment, and that sequence of events is what, one in a trillion?"

"Still, I wish we'd had access to that technology sooner."

As the two men paused outside the conference room the meeting was being held in, MacIntosh gestured to the open door. "You first, sir."

Dunleavy nodded and inclined his head, then walked through the open door. MacIntosh followed, to find only President Spencer and two of his ever-present bodyguards; they were with him all hours of the day and night.

"Gentlemen, have a seat," Spencer said, all business.

MacIntosh closed the door to the conference room behind him while Dunleavy took a seat in one of the richly appointed chairs directly across from the president. MacIntosh joined him a few moments later, sitting to his left.

"I've read over your report, Andrew. I'm at a loss to explain how we weren't aware of this information before sending the *Lion of Judah* on a port call."

“Mr. President, it would appear that we had an intelligence failure. Our assets on Monrovia have always been a bit thin, and most of them were rolled up the last few years. With other threats out there, we didn’t invest in getting new assets. The Monrovian government controls its media and punishes dissent harshly. We went back and reviewed the referendums, and there are several that were voted on, but none are directly calling for the execution of believers. Our intelligence analysts believe that most people don’t know what’s going on,” Dunleavy said.

“Gentlemen, we’ve got a catch twenty-two situation here. I want nothing more than to go in guns blazing. But, if we do that, we hand a major propaganda victory to the League, who will use it to bash our heads in on the galactic stage as warmongers and hypocrites who say one thing and do another. At the same time, if we allow this to occur, we’re complicit in the genocide of millions of people. I won’t have that on my conscience.”

MacIntosh cleared his throat. “Sir, I believe I have a solution to thread the needle.”

“You want to call in a third party to deal with it?” Dunleavy asked.

“Yes. I have a group in mind that has the numbers, training, and capability.”

“Care to share?” Spencer said dryly.

“Except to say that they’re trustworthy and registered with the Coalition Defense Force as a preferred vendor, I don’t think I should, sir. You need plausible deniability if it blows up in our face. The only thing I require is your approval and authorization to transfer a modest amount of funds and military hardware.”

“A PMC?” Spencer asked sharply, referencing a private military corporation.

“After a fashion. A charitably funded outfit.” MacIntosh offered his own wry grin.

“Ah, yes, I should have known,” Dunleavy said. “I’ve no objections to this course of action, Mr. President.”

“What are their chances of success, Andrew?” Spencer asked, direct and to the point.

“As certain as we can be in this business, Mr. President. If anyone can do it, they can.”

Spencer nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, gentlemen. I’ll sign off on it. Andrew, don’t screw this up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Carry on,” Spencer replied, standing from his chair.

9

SARA SARNO, Mother Superior of the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense, was in the middle of her daily prayers. Sitting in the pew of the small chapel on their remote abbey, she first prayed the rosary, as she did practically every morning. A sixty-nine-year-old woman that was born on New Brazil, her family traced its roots back to the old Earth country of Italy. Brushing a wisp of graying hair out of the way, she looked up to see a young novice standing off to the side.

"What is it, my child?"

"Mother Superior, please accept my sincere apology for interrupting your prayers. There is a vidlink message for you," the young novice said hesitantly.

"From who?"

"General Andrew MacIntosh."

Sarno smiled and stood. "Thank you for telling me. Is he still on the line?"

"Yes, Mother Superior. He said it was most important and to tell you the CDF is paying the cost of the call."

"Return to your duties, then. I'll make my way to the terminal."

As the young woman nodded and scurried off, Sarno made her way to the lone communication link in the abbey and

found it still on, with MacIntosh's face half obscured.

"Andrew," Sarno began, sitting down on the chair in front of the small camera. "It's been far too long. How are you today?"

MacIntosh looked down and into the camera with a smile. "Greetings, Sara."

"You used my first name and smiled. I don't know what you want, but it's going to be big."

"Guilty as charged. But before we get there, how you have been?"

"The Sisters and I have soldiered on the last couple of years. We're solving small problems and helping to spread God's peace where we can. Thanks to your last contribution, we've been able to grow our ranks. Nothing ever gets thrown out here, you know. We've got equipment that was old at the beginning of the war, still perfectly functional."

"What about you, though?"

"Is that concern in your voice?"

MacIntosh smiled. "Yes."

"I took solemn vows, Andrew. It would be a sin to tempt me."

"I know…that's why I leave you alone as much as I can."

"Except when you can't. Tell me, what's happened?"

MacIntosh sat back, the camera showing that he was in his own office. "Colonel Cohen and the *Lion of Judah* have discovered that a neutral planet is committing genocide against its religious citizens."

"That sounds like a job for the Terran Coalition Marine Corps," Sarno said bluntly.

"It's politically impossible for us to intervene overtly. We must have plausible deniability. I've been authorized to make that happen."

Sarno's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

MacIntosh pressed on. “My file says your order is up to fifteen thousand strong. We believe that Monrovia—that’s the planet—would be incapable of resisting a modern force of five thousand. If you can commit half your strength, we’ll commit intelligence assets and targeting information.” “We’re also spread across eight different planets, providing peacekeepers and police services. I can’t just up and pull out.”

“If you can’t do it, I have to try to contract with a PMC. I don’t believe they’d have the same effectiveness, and I know they lack respect for human life.”

Sarno smiled. “Guilting me, Andrew?”

MacIntosh grinned. “Whatever it takes to accomplish the mission.”

“Is the Terran Coalition prepared to make a charitable… donation for this effort?”

“I can offer you seventy-five hundred battle rifles, ammunition, medical supplies, armored personnel carriers, five main battle tanks, Grant IIIs, not the IVs. Two hundred suits of combat armor, and a squadron of space superiority fighters in addition to three million credits.”

Sarno’s eyebrows shot up. *That’s a lot of firepower, and we need the money*. “You know we prefer non-lethal solutions, of course.”

“There is room for discussion.”

“It’s a good starting point… but I’d want at least fifty APCs, twenty tanks, a thousand suits of combat armor, and I’d like your latest versions of area denial weapons, especially the thermal-based models.”

“Done.”

That was too easy. Let’s see how far of a leash he’s got on this. “One more request, Andrew. Our assault ships are old and very costly to maintain. I want four of your last generation assault landers. I know the CDF just did a large upgrade

program and you have a bunch of them sitting in mothballs. I'd also like one of the Gladius-class destroyers from the emergency reserve fleet."

"That…could take some doing."

"So is what you want me to do."

"I thought your order's mission was taking just causes and making them right in the eyes of God?" MacIntosh asked.

"It is, but those missions have a cost. Unlike most of the people we help, who are penniless and oppressed… the Terran Coalition has nearly unlimited amounts of funds. It can afford to help us aid the needy."

"I can transfer everything but the ships now. The ships will be dependent on successful completion of the mission."

"We haven't exactly discussed what that mission is. Are you looking for us to effect regime change?"

MacIntosh shook his head. "No, we want you to set up safe zones, work with the local resistance movement to do so, and then we'll send in transports to evacuate anyone willing to leave. The Terran Coalition cannot be involved in overthrowing the government of a neutral planet that was duly elected."

"I'll need to see your intelligence, of course."

"Of course."

"Once I review it and perform supplication, we will have an agreement, Andrew. Will I get to see you again in person?"

"Not on this one. You'll interface with Colonel Cohen. He will brief you and transfer the supplies before getting underway for the *Lion*'s next mission."

"Take care of yourself, Andrew. Are you taking care of your soul?"

"I try. Confession remains hard… the things we must do to win. There's a stain on my soul that never quite

disappears."

"Trust in God," Sarno replied. "He will see us through. He is the only thing worth our adoration and faith."

"Take care of yourself out there. You'll like the young colonel. He reminds me of you in younger days."

Sarno smiled. "Then this ought to be an interesting mission. Godspeed, Andrew."

A moment later, MacIntosh's face blinked out and the terminal went blank, showing the video link program waiting for a signal or input. Sarno sat back in the simple chair, deep in thought. *This will be a difficult undertaking, one that I will need to pray over before fully committing us. We could help so many more, though; God must see that in his plan for our order.* The voice of her assistant, a young novice who had only been with them for three months, jolted her out of her reverie. "Mother Superior, I was sent to remind you that the ceremony for Sister Mary is to begin shortly."

Sarno looked up and nodded. "I will join you all momentarily. I must pray first."

"Yes, Mother Superior."

A FEW HOURS later onboard the *Lion of Judah*, David was back in his day cabin, awaiting connection of another call from MacIntosh. *I hope the general has some good news… I think he bought into my argument. We live in hope.* He grinned at the thought of one of his favorite sayings.

MacIntosh's face came into view as the vidlink synched.

"Good to see you, sir."

"You as well, Colonel. How's your ship's budget for communication credits after the last couple of days?"

David laughed. "I'm glad it's not coming out of my pay."

“I’ve got some good news for you. We have a private military organization coming to help.”

“Who, sir?” David asked, his brow furrowed.

“A Catholic military order; the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense.”

David stared at MacIntosh quizzically. “Nuns, sir? With respect, we need an army, not a prayer team.”

MacIntosh laughed hard, shaking his head. “Colonel, I would pay my entire salary for the next year to see you say that to Mother Superior Sarno. I consider her order to be one of the finest private military organizations in the Terran Coalition. I’d strongly advise you to treat her and her fellow Sisters with respect.”

David felt his face turn red. *That’s what happens when you assume*. “I apologize, sir. I just think of nuns as sitting in a convent and praying or feeding the sick and hungry. They do great work, but clearly, more than that is needed here.”

“Well, they’re not exactly common knowledge, Colonel, so I’ll let it slide. They prefer non-lethal solutions, but we’re going to be augmenting their capabilities for this mission. I’ll send you a list of military hardware to transfer to them from the *Lion*’s stores. You will also provide them with intelligence data, target estimates, and a briefing on the situation.”

“Yes, sir. Will we be providing overwatch and fire support, sir? We’ve been working on a list of military targets.”

“Absolutely not, Colonel,” MacIntosh snapped. “You’re to have no direct involvement with this operation. You, nor any member of your crew. Are we clear?”

“Crystal, sir. Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted, Colonel.”

“Sir, if we’re supplying them with arms from our stores and providing them targeting information, how are we not

involved?"

MacIntosh shrugged. "There's a big difference between supplying some gear that was paid for via foreign military sales and a sensor sweep... and attacking a neutral planet directly."

"With respect, that's BS, sir. We're hiding behind plausible deniability and directly lowering the odds of success."

"That's your opinion, Colonel. Your orders stand."

"Aye aye, sir," David grated out.

"Colonel, I understand your idealism," MacIntosh said after a few seconds of silence. "I respect it, and it's one of the reasons I put you in command of the *Lion*. But... idealism doesn't solve every problem, and there are instances where it can be fatal."

"I don't consider wanting to save the lives of millions of innocent people to be idealism, General. I consider it to be my duty."

"Maybe in a perfect universe, you'd be right. But our leaders, even the best of them, are constrained by the limits of the political situation. President Spencer is doing everything he can, and so am I. I need you on board, Colonel."

"I understand my orders, sir, and I will carry them out to the best of my ability," David said, forcing his face into a neutral expression.

"Sometimes that's all we've got. Orders are orders, and we don't get to decide which ones we'll obey and which we won't, as long as they're lawful."

"Yes, sir."

"Update me once you transfer the supplies, and the sisters are ready to engage."

"Understood, sir."

"Godspeed, Colonel. MacIntosh out."

David stood up after the transmission cut out, tossing his tablet onto the desk angrily. He sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. Ultimately, MacIntosh was right; they had to follow orders. It didn't change that sometimes they were wrong. He believed with every fiber of his being that they should storm that planet and to hell with the political consequences. Anyone who remotely had a moral code would see they were right. He guessed that was why he implemented orders and other people gave them. *Okay, David, focus. Get things ready to go*. He picked up his tablet and sent a message off to the senior crew to attend a meeting at 1400 hours.

SARNO'S inner sanctum sat deep within the convent. It was a small suite; the apartment she used to have on Canaan before joining the order was larger. There was just something peaceful and tranquil about it, though. *I do love it here*. When she needed to consider difficult issues or to consult with her most trusted lieutenants, what amounted to her living room was where she did it. A statue of the Virgin Mary adorned her fireplace mantel, along with various religious artifacts. In keeping with the rules of the order, there were very few personal touches; only a few picture frames that displayed rolling slideshows of friends and family throughout the years.

There was a polite knock at the door. "Come in, children!"

The door creaked open, and two nuns in full robes and habits walked in, bowing slightly in front of Sarno.

The older nun was Emma Kaufman; she was a veteran member of the Terran Coalition Marine Corps; the younger was their resident fighter squadron commander, Oni Arendse. Arendse had served for several years in the CDF,

achieving the rank of captain before she mustered out and joined the order. “Sisters, thank you for joining me this evening,” Sarno began. “Have you considered the proposal the CDF has given us regarding the situation on Monrovia?”

Both nuns nodded, but Kaufman spoke for them. “Yes, Mother Superior. I’ve given it much thought and prayer.”

“What’s your position on the matter, then?”

“It’s difficult not to look at the practical considerations in addition to the moral aspects,” Kaufman said. “The equipment that’s on offer… we need it to keep up our operations tempo. There’s no shortage of people in this galaxy that need our help, especially along the frontier where the CDF lacks resources to keep the peace. Put that aside, how could we possibly turn away when hundreds of thousands of people are being murdered, and sleep at night knowing we could have made a difference?”

“We’ve studied the available intel on the Monrovian military. As far as conflict goes, we’re very well prepared to fight them, Mother Superior,” Arendse said. “We’d have complete air superiority with the offer of latest generation CDF space superiority fighters. I concur with Sister Kaufman, however… we cannot turn away. I feel that conviction in my soul.”

Sarno steepled her hands together. “I have prayed for guidance for hours as well. I have to balance the needs of the order with our mission to protect the weak and the innocent. That is at times a difficult balance, one that leads to not taking on a cause that is demonstrably just but would also lead to the destruction of the order. I agree with both of your assessments. I believe we have a path to victory should God choose to grant it to us. Therefore, we will take on this cause. Summon as many sisters as we can from all ongoing operations. We’ll need a force of seven to eight thousand to have a reasonable chance for victory.”

Kaufman bowed her head. “Yes, Mother Superior.”

Arendse also bowed in respect. “I will prepare the pilots, Mother Superior.”

“Godspeed, Sisters.”

10

"I FIND it hard to believe that your government is sending a religious order of… what did you call them again?" Aibek asked, his head tilted to the side.

"Nuns," David said, glancing around the bridge of the *Lion*.

"Wouldn't it be far easier just to invade them, expose their crimes, and allow the galaxy to decide for itself?"

"XO, I already made that argument, in triplicate, to command. Our job now is to follow orders." David realized he sounded precisely like MacIntosh had earlier. *Ah, the joys of being in charge. Why'd I sign up for this again?*

"Conn, TAO," Ruth interjected. "New contact, bearing two-eight-zero, mark positive fifteen. Range fifteen thousand kilometers. Contact identified as a Gonzalez class light transport, designated Sierra fifty-seven." In CDF nomenclature, a contact designed as Sierra was non-hostile, and not considered a threat.

"Acknowledged, TAO. Well, XO… I think that's the first wave." David smirked before he turned toward Taylor. "Communications, get me a vidlink with Sierra fifty-seven."

"Aye, sir! They're contacting us, sir. Transferring to your viewer."

A few moments later, Sarno's image appeared on David's viewer screen. To Aibek's previous point, he found himself startled by her appearance in a traditional white and black nun's habit and a simple black cloth dress. Desperate times, though, called for desperate measures.

"Mother Superior Sarno," David said, hoping he didn't butcher the pronunciation of her name. "I am Colonel David Cohen, commanding officer of the CSV *Lion of Judah*. Greetings and thank you for your assistance."

Sarno's tone was business-like. "Thank you, Colonel Cohen. It has been a long journey, and I am anxious to proceed with our mission. I understand that we are to meet onboard your ship to review the transfer of material and pick up intelligence."

"Yes, ma'am. We're ready to receive you and your delegation at any time."

"Then we would like to come over now, Colonel. I understand that time is short."

David nodded. "Very well, send a shuttle over."

"Thank you, Colonel." The image blinked out after she finished.

Aibek stared at David. "Direct."

"Just the way I like it, XO."

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, David, Aibek, Hanson, Ruth, Amir, Calvin, and Kenneth Lowe all sat in the conference room on deck one. David pondered how the CDF would avoid being tied back to the sisters' actions. *We'll use the contractors to keep this as clean as possible. It's thin, but… the spin doctors will be able to use it.*

"I understand that this is a bit unorthodox, folks," David said. "I believe, however, that it's our best chance to help

these people, as I've explained previously."

Calvin crossed his arms in front of him. "We're giving civilians a lot of military-grade hardware here, sir. Some of this stuff is cutting edge, especially the crowd control weaponry."

"The nuns place a premium to safeguarding life. They specifically requested non-lethal weapons, though I do agree we're going out on a limb here, Colonel."

The hatch swung open, interrupting David as several women in long robes and the same black and white habit walked in. The woman in the lead bowed slightly. "Colonel Cohen, I am Mother Superior Sara Sarno. Thank you for taking the time to meet with us. May I present Sisters Emma Kaufman and Oni Arendse?"

David stood, as did the rest of those in the room. "Thank you, Mother Superior, Sisters. A pleasure to meet all of you. These are my senior officers—Lieutenant Colonel Talgat Aibek, the *Lion*'s executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Hassan Amir, Carrier Air Group commander, Lieutenant Colonel Calvin Demood, MEU commander, Major Arthur Hanson, chief engineer, First Lieutenant Ruth Goldberg, Tactical Action Officer... and finally, Kenneth Lowe. Mr. Lowe oversees the contractors onboard. His personnel will be transferring the supplies."

Sarno offered a slight smile. "That's quite a mouthful, Colonel. Though, with so many crewmen on this ship, I would expect an impressive number of officers."

David gestured to the open chairs at the table. "Please, have a seat."

The three nuns sat down gracefully, after which David and his team returned to their seats. The marine that had escorted them closed the hatch door behind him, leaving the room secure and silent.

“Mother Superior, thank you for joining us. I’m assuming you are fully briefed on the planet below?” At her nod of assent, David continued. “We’ve prepared an intelligence file with targeting information on the planet’s military forces. Monrovia’s National Guard is limited in size, with roughly fifty thousand active-duty soldiers. It does, however, have more than half a million reservists in its ranks.”

“My understanding is that their level of technology is far behind the Terran Coalition’s,” Sarno said as a point of fact.

Calvin spoke up. “Correct. For instance, their main battle tanks with hover capabilities would be what we consider to be second generation of ‘modern’ weapons. Ours are sixth generation. CDF Intelligence analysis believes that one platoon of our tanks could eliminate a division of theirs. They lack the weaponry to break through our protective materials.”

“I still have concerns that sheer numbers could overrun us.”

David nodded. “We share those concerns and will supply you with the *Lion*’s entire supply of area denial weapon systems. If you come up against a large force of infantry, those weapons will make anyone within two thousand meters feel like they’re on fire, and the closer they get, the worse the effect gets.”

“The plan is sound, Colonel. My sisters and I have prayed—oh, how we have prayed—and I believe it is God’s will that we help in any way we can. Once we’ve transferred the new weapons and supplies to my flagship, I will call the rest of the sisters to battle. They’re waiting a couple of lightyears away. I would ask that you stay on station until we’re safely on the planet’s surface.”

“That exceeds my orders, ma’am,” David said slowly.

“I see. Will the space superiority fighters given to us have anti-space loadouts as well?”

“I can set you up with some anti-ship missiles, Mother Superior,” Amir said in his accented English. “Monrovia has planetary defenses, but they’re also behind the times. I doubt they will be able to offer much resistance. Regardless, the fighters you will be receiving will be more than a match for Monrovia’s antiquated air forces.”

Ruth leaned forward in her chair, “Mother Superior, if I may… I thought nuns were generally dedicated to helping the sick and needy. I’ve never heard of such an organization as yours before.”

David raised an eyebrow and glanced at Ruth with a questioning look. The truth was, though, he was just as interested in the subject as she was, and he assumed everyone else in the room was too.

Sarno smiled in return. “That’s a question I get often. Our lineage traces back several centuries to when the Exodus had first occurred, right after humanity began to spread out from Canaan. There was a period when military forces were few and far between. We tried to help keep the peace, and in time, we grew. At first, there were only a few hundred members of our order. We expanded greatly during the war with the Saurian empire; it overtaxed the CDF and left them unable to police some of the border planets. We’ve again grown during the ongoing war with the League. We try to fill in the places where the unjust would prey on the weak. Most of our sisters served with the CDF before joining the convent, but some come from neutral planets. A few are even defectors from the League of Sol itself.”

“How do you get funded?” David asked, now thoroughly intrigued. “I can’t imagine keeping what amounts to a private army going is cheap.”

“The same way all religious orders get their funding, Colonel: charity. That and our brother order of monks work for and donate their earnings to our coffers. They keep our

equipment in good shape, too. We're very selective of which causes we take. Only after much prayer and supplication do we decide to accept a request. The justness of the cause must be completely above reproach."

David nodded, fascinated by the concept. "I must say, Mother Superior, what you're doing is unique. I salute you and your sisters. I'm also thankful that you were able to help these people, especially when we can't."

"I believe the proper term is 'won't,' Colonel Cohen," Sarno said, her gaze unflinching.

"Orders are orders, ma'am."

"Just following orders has been used throughout the history of humanity to justify some of the worst possible atrocities. The Nazis, the nuclear destruction of San Francisco before the Exodus, and practically everything the League of Sol does. Let us not forget that refusing to act can in and of itself be a moral crime," Sarno spat back at him

David's face betrayed shock; he'd stepped on a landmine unknowingly. "Mother Superior," he said, in the most diplomatic tone he could muster. "I may agree with your assessment, but my job now is to equip you for this fight and then ship out to engage the League. My prayers will go with you, as will the thoughts and prayers of everyone in this room."

Sarno inclined her head. "Then I thank you, Colonel Cohen. When can we begin the transfer?"

Kenneth cleared his throat. "I've taken the liberty of preparing the supplies in cargo bay one. I've got a crew standing by to move the gear once your sisters finish inspecting the goods."

"That is acceptable to us."

"Very well. Mother Superior, you and your crew would be most welcome to join my senior officers and me tonight for dinner," David said with palpable relief.

“Thank you for such a kind offer, Colonel, but we must decline. Our order is very simple, and we will spend tonight praying and beseeching God, his Son, and the Holy Spirit for guidance and strength to see us through this battle.”

David stood. “Then we’ll let everyone be on their way. Good luck and Godspeed.”

Sarno stood, as did the two sisters with her. David gestured for the door, and the *Lion*’s crew filed out, along with the two sisters. He and Sarno took up the rear. “I’ve meant to ask, how is it that General MacIntosh and you know each other?”

Sarno smiled. “He and I served together. Since I took over the order, he’s helped us on several occasions. Much of our better equipment is CDF issue.”

“Well, that makes sense. The general is a Catholic after all.”

Sarno reached out and put her hand on David’s shoulder. “He thinks much of you, Colonel. Keep up what you’re doing and stick to the narrow path.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and walked off with the two other women, their robes sweeping along the floor of the passageway and attracting looks from the crewmembers passing by.

AFTER THE NUNS had returned to the cargo bay and the transfer was underway, David decided to make his way to the synagogue, also known as the shul, onboard the *Lion*. The ever-present tug between his faith and his duties pulled at him as he removed his *tallit gadol*, or prayer shawl, out of a simple cloth bag his mother had made for him many years before. As it was mid-watch, there weren’t many others in the shul, and he made his way to the small office in the back

of the expansive room. He stuck his head through the door and saw Rabbi Kravitz hard at work behind a computer panel.

"Rabbi, do you have a minute?" David asked.

"I've always got time for a fellow Jew, David," Kravitz replied in his jovial voice. "Pull up a chair and tell me what's on your mind."

David shut the door behind him and pulled one of the chairs in front of the desk back, sitting down heavily in it. "Rabbi, do you believe that we always have to follow orders?"

"Are you asking me as a fellow officer or as a Jew?"

"Let's start with just another Jew," David said, his face drawn.

"I think we have to weigh every decision that we make, and I don't think that God accepts just following orders as a defense for acting against His mitzvot," Kravitz said, referencing Jewish law.

"We agree then, Rabbi."

"Have you been ordered to do something wrong?"

David shook his head. "I've been ordered not to interfere in the Monrovian situation. The *Lion* is to enable a third party to deal with the problem and move on to our next engagement zone with the League. Admiral Kartal is marshaling forces to attack a League-held border planet that has a high lithium ore concentration."

"Would that have something to do with the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense?" Kravitz asked with a smug grin on his face.

David laughed. "Rabbi, you always know what's going on. I marvel at that."

Kravitz winked. "Direct line to God."

"Yes… they're going to deal with the Monrovian government. But…" David paused for a moment, his voice

failing him, afraid to say what he was thinking. “Rabbi, I was taught and raised my entire life as a child that we would never again sit back and allow innocent people to be slaughtered simply for what they chose to believe in. I’m being ordered to turn away, to step aside. I don’t doubt that these nuns can handle the Monrovian military. But I think by not fighting myself, I’m sinning against God.”

Kravitz sat back in his chair as he steepled his fingers together. “That’s a difficult judgment to make, David. As a fellow officer, don’t you realize you might be subject to severe repercussions for disobeying a direct order?”

“I do. I’m not going to order my crew to disobey orders, but I can’t just forget this and move on.”

“Are you looking for advice or my blessing?”

David smiled ruefully. “Both?”

“I think you‘re a man of deep feelings, and I think you have a need to punish evildoers. I want you to remember that the Torah says that repayment for evil deeds is the Lord’s job, not ours.”

“It also says not to allow others to die or come to harm by our lack of action.”

“Oh, so you think you’re the rabbi now, eh? Maybe I should retire and let you take over here.”

David, in spite of himself, laughed. “I meant no disrespect, Rabbi.”

“I know you didn’t, David, but I worry for you. I can’t tell you not to go and try to right this wrong. For all I know, God wants you to go and will somehow work through you for the betterment of us all. I do want you to check your heart and be sure of your intent. If you want to help save others, then that will work together for good. But if your motivation is to gain revenge on those who have committed these atrocities, it will come back harshly on you.”

David nodded. “Thank you for that perspective, Rabbi.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to take a temporary leave of absence from my post, leave the ship in the hands of the XO, and do everything in my power to help the nuns.”

“General MacIntosh will not be pleased.”

“If the general is half the man I think he is, he’ll be upset, but he’ll understand. I think he’d do the same if he were in my place.”

“I suppose we will both get a ringside seat to see if you’re right, David.” Kravitz shook his head sadly. “Just don’t get hurt down there, okay? It took me long enough to get stationed to a capital ship with a Jewish commander. I’ve come to enjoy eating in the wardroom.”

David laughed out loud; something about the rabbi’s manner was like a salve for the soul. “That’ll be my number one reason for keeping my head attached to its body, Rabbi.”

“Good, good!” Kravitz too smirked a bit before leaning forward in his chair. “Will you come to prayers tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it, Rabbi.”

“I’ll see you then, David.”

David stood, nodded his assent, and walked out of the rabbi’s office. *Well, this is going to go over like a turd in a punch bowl. Best to get a good night’s sleep after prayers, then brief the senior staff in the morning. I’m probably going to shock them, and not in a positive way.*

11

THE NEXT MORNING, David rose at his regular time of 0430 CMT. There was something about the routine that had been ingrained in him to the point that practically no matter where he was—if he was on active duty, on leave, on or off the ship—he woke up without the need of an alarm at 0430. After his regular exercise program, he showered, shaved, and prepared for the day. A hearty breakfast and a big mug of coffee later, he was ready to face the decision he'd made the day before and inform his senior staff what was going to happen.

Walking down the passageway that led to the nearest gravlit, David considered what Sheila would have thought. *She always was a stickler for doing what was right, over explicitly following orders.* He had spent much of the night second-guessing himself but ultimately decided that doing what he felt was morally right—doing as much as possible to save the lives of the innocents on Monrovia—outweighed every other consideration.

Swinging the hatch to the conference room open, David found the entire command staff already present, including Hayworth and Kenneth, who he had explicitly invited. He cracked a smile as he slid into the chair at the head of the

table. “This is a record… everyone here on time.” There was something about the atmosphere in the room, he realized; it was thick enough you could cut it with a knife.

Ruth spoke first. “Sir, are we going to move on without helping these people?”

“Those are our orders, Lieutenant. I have every confidence in the sisters to accomplish their mission.”

“I read up on them, sir. While I have to say I’m impressed with what they accomplish…this is a real, shooting war. That’s a lot different from peacekeeping actions and keeping some pirates at bay.”

“That’s why I’m going to be staying behind,” David said. Gasps sounded, and shock crossed the faces of everyone in the room. He looked to Aibek. “Sorry to spring this on you, XO. I went back and forth on it all night.”

Aibek shook his head. “No apology required, Colonel. In a matter of honor such as this… I respect your decision and commend you for it.”

“You will take command in my absence, XO, and engage the League battlegroup the admiral wants to attack.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir, how do you expect to make a difference by yourself?” Merriweather asked.

“I’m not sure, Major. If nothing else, I’m one more gun and another set of hands.”

Calvin broke into his trademark cocky Marine grin. “You want some company, Colonel? These guys sound a whole lot like Leaguers. As we all know, there’s only one way for a Leaguer to retire properly. My Marines would love to assist.”

David shook his head in reply. “No… I won’t see everyone else caught up in charges of desertion. I need to do this alone. There is one thing you can do, though. As our updates flow in, make sure that reporter knows about it. I believe that enormous pressure can be brought to bear against the

Monrovian government by the Organization of Non-Aligned Planets, as well as our citizens demanding the Terran Coalition intervene."

"You got it, sir," Calvin said.

"Everything else ready on this tub?" David asked the room at large.

"Engineering is good to go, sir; reactor is normal," Hanson said.

"Of course it's normal. I designed it," Hayworth interjected.

Despite his annoyance, David smirked at Hayworth. "Love the confidence, Doctor."

Hayworth opened his mouth to say something further, only to have Merriweather elbow him in the ribs. "What the doctor means is that the team is doing a wonderful job of optimizing the systems that control matter/anti-matter flow, based on the real-life data we've got now."

Hayworth seemingly changed his tune on a dime. "Quite right."

Still smiling, David considered how deftly Merriweather had Hayworth wrapped around her finger. She was the only person on the ship that the doctor seemed to genuinely respect. *I'm going to have to understand that better sometime*.

"Colonel Cohen, do we know what the medical situation with the sisters is like?" Tural asked.

"They asked for a lot of medical supplies. I don't know too much about their personnel except that they don't have many doctors."

Tural nodded, his brow furrowed together as if he was in deep thought.

"Anyone else?"

There was a general shaking of heads around the table. "All right, ladies and gentlemen; good luck out there. Good hunting and Godspeed. Dismissed."

Those in the room lept to their feet as David rose. Standing at the door, David shook the hand of each person as they left; Kenneth Lowe had taken up the rear. As he got to him, he gestured to the side. “Kenneth, let’s take a moment privately.”

“Of course, sir,” Kenneth said.

“I might need your assistance while I’m on Monrovia. Do you think you could work some magic for me?”

“What kind of magic, sir?”

“Let’s just say I might need access to sensor information, or a go-between for myself and the sisters, with the *Lion*.”

“And it would be better to have a civilian doing that, so there are no CDF fingerprints?” Kenneth asked.

“Got it in one,” David said. “I won’t ask you to do anything that isn’t morally right.”

Kenneth stepped back on one foot. “What about illegal under the law, regardless of the right or wrong, sir?”

“I can’t promise I won’t ask you to skirt the line; the only thing I can promise is that it will be for the right reasons and a good cause.”

“I’ll do everything I can, but I’d rather not get my people in trouble. I guess what I’m saying is, if it skirts the line and I can do it, I will. I can’t ask the others to do the same.”

“I understand… we’re in the same boat on this one.”

Kenneth stuck out his hand. “Good luck out there, sir. Godspeed.”

David took the extended hand and shook it warmly. “Thank you, Kenneth. I’ll see you in a few days, hopefully.”

As David moved to open the hatch once more and head out, Kenneth called out from behind him, “Hope is not a strategy, sir!”

Smiling, David looked back before he stepped through to the corridor. “No, but I’m pretty sure those nuns have a good

one after meeting with their Mother Superior. See you around, Kenneth."

Over the next couple of hours, David tidied up his remaining paperwork, sent a time-delayed transmission to General MacIntosh telling him of his plans, and packed a "space bag." Of all the things he had to do, packing was the hardest because, for once, he wasn't wearing his uniform in a combat zone. Instead, he put several changes of civilian clothing, along with his essential toiletry gear, into the duffle, and proceeded to the ship's armory. Most of the contents of the bag ended up being ballistic armor, an advanced battle rifle with infrared optics and his preferred sidearm type, an MS-19. While the standard CDF-issued projectile sidearm was named the MS-18 and sported special rounds for spaceborne combat, its larger brother was energy based and boasted extreme stopping power. The only downside was it went through its charges—battery packs basically—quickly. He was careful to take a couple of handfuls of the small energy cells to go with him.

Walking down the central passageway of the ship, which was triple the size of a traditional one due to the vast size of the *Lion of Judah*, David made his way from the forward section back to the hangar space. The Little Sisters of Divine Recompense had docked their assault lander in section A2, near the Marine transports. One benefit of wearing civilian clothes on a ship the size of the *Lion* was that many members of the crew just hadn't seen him enough to realize who he was as he waded into the sea of humanity that overran the hangar.

He made his way over to the area that the nuns occupied and dropped his bag at his feet, a few feet away from Sarno.

“Mother Superior, David Cohen, reporting for duty.”

Sarno glanced at him; she was engrossed in a conversation with several sisters who wore long robes and habits as they looked over the gleaming new battle rifles. “Colonel Cohen?” she asked, her voice slightly higher pitched in surprise.

“Just David Cohen today.”

“This is most irregular.”

“I put in for a temporary leave of absence, Mother Superior. I want to be of assistance in freeing the people on Monrovia, if you’re willing to have me along.”

Sarno’s forehead scrunched together as she stepped toward him. “Col…David, it sounds like you don’t have permission to do this.”

“I do not, ma’am.”

“You could cost yourself a promising career.”

David shook his head. “I’m not in the CDF for a promising career. I’m in the CDF to save lives, defeat the League of Sol, and protect my fellow countrymen. To rescue the weak and defend those who can’t defend themselves. As a soldier and a Jew, I can’t turn away.”

Sarno smiled and held out her hand; David took it and grasped firmly, surprised at how firm her handshake was. “While I’m grateful for your help and glad you saw that just following orders isn’t an excuse to do nothing in the face of evil, there are conditions to joining us.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“First and foremost, this order has existed for hundreds of years; it has traditions, a defined chain of command, and you will not alter it in any way, nor attempt to. Are we clear, young man?”

“Yes, ma’am,” David said crisply. *Hey, it's like boot camp all over again, except instead of Staff Sergeant Salizar, it’s a*

Roman Catholic nun. If nothing else, my mother will get a laugh out of this story. He forced down a smile.

"With those understandings, I would welcome you to join our efforts."

Out of the corner of his eye, David thought he saw a group of people in civilian attire; turning his head to see for sure, it shocked him to see Calvin, Amir, Doctor Tural, Rabbi Kravitz, and Angie all walking across the hangar with a sense of purpose. All were dressed in nondescript clothing and carried duffle bags with them, except Angie, who had a hard case and a small bag. Directly behind them were the rest of the senior officers, led by Aibek. Ruth, Hammond, Merriweather, Taylor, Hanson, Dr. Hayworth, and Master Chief Tinetariro flanked him; the rest of the crewmembers of the ship present in the hangar simply tried to get out of the way.

"One moment, Mother Superior," David said, turning toward the approaching group. "Ladies and gentlemen… what's the meaning of this?"

Calvin and Amir glanced at each other with an expression that seemed to say, "Who wants to go first?" Calvin spoke up before Amir could. "Well, Colonel… we're not letting you go off by yourself. Amir's going to fly one of the fighters and do his flyboy routine, I'm rogering up to plaster assholes, Doc's here to patch us up, the rabbi wants to convert everyone, and Ms. Dinman is here to make us look bad. That about sum it up, everyone?"

"I'm here to tell the truth about the situation, Colonel," Angie said, only half-jokingly.

"And Jews do not try to gain converts, for the last time, Colonel Demood," Kravitz added.

"Do I need to remind you that the *Lion* is going to fight the League? That's where you all need to be," David

managed to say after the laughter from the exchange had died down.

"My understanding is that you're on a temporary leave of absence, Colonel. I believe Colonel Aibek is now the chief Saurian in charge," Calvin said, seemingly reveling in the role of spokesman for the group.

"Still, I can't ask you to risk your lives to help me with this endeavor. It's something I need to do."

"You're not asking, Colonel. We're coming. That's what friends do, and friends also sign up to shoot Leaguers any time we can."

David smirked. "There's no Leaguers here yet."

"That we know of. Besides, they want to join the League. Good enough for me."

"We were thinking about parking the ship here and offering fire support, Colonel," Ruth said with a grin on her face.

David smiled and looked into the eyes of each one of them; he knew he wasn't going to be able to change anyone's mind. "Okay, let's say I agree to this... you still have to convince Mother Superior Sarno."

Sarno walked over, her gown almost dragging on the floor behind her. "As I told David, you are all welcome. You will follow my orders, you will obey the rules of our order, and you will not attempt to change the way that we do things. If you agree, board the lander. We're ready to go."

David's gaze shifted to Aibek. "XO, are you sure about this?"

"I am certain we will be combat ready, even with the loss of several fine officers. This mission on Monrovia is important. It is important enough to send some of our best assets to act as force multipliers, as you humans would say."

David smirked; Aibek had studiously picked up human military slang. "Okay. Those of you out of uniform, with me.

Everyone else, get back to your stations and make me proud."

While Calvin and the others moved toward the assault lander, the rest of the senior staff brought themselves to attention and saluted.

David brought his hand to his brow and snapped off a crisp salute in return. "Carry on, ladies and gentlemen… and XO, don't scratch the paint."

Aibek grinned in the toothy Saurian way. "Godspeed, sir."

Turning away, David walked up the bay to the assault lander. The ship's computer, once it registered his entrance to the sisters' vessel, played a pre-recorded message. "CSV *Lion of Judah* departing."

Taking a moment to contemplate what he was doing, David hoped that commanding the mighty vessel was still an option after the mission to Monrovia was complete. *Even if it's not, this is the right call.* He was confident deep within his soul he'd made the right decision.

12

Fifteen minutes after David had stowed his gear in a small cabin that was smaller than junior officer's quarters back on the *Rabin*, he made his way to the bridge of the ship at the request of Sarno. *Funny how we get used to our creature comforts.* He considered as he mentally groused about the small rack that seemed designed for a short person. *Well, that makes sense; most women are shorter than men, so they can fit more bunks in by making them smaller. I hope I can make some useful contributions here and maybe learn something new myself.* More than anything, he liked to observe other command styles and gain nuggets of information to improve his own.

The bridge onboard the assault lander—which the nuns had named *Michael*—was unlike anything David had ever seen before. It resembled a church more than the command deck of a starship; the bridge crew consisted entirely of nuns wearing both long robes and habits. *I've got to hand it to them; they live what they believe.* Sarno sat in the CO's chair, while the nuns worked the startup checklist.

"Welcome, David!" Sarno said as David walked into her field of view.

"Thank you, Mother Superior. A fine vessel you have here. Named after the archangel, I assume?"

"*Michael* is indeed named after the archangel. He is the patron saint of the military, after all, to Catholics."

"I must confess, my knowledge of your beliefs is limited."

Sarno gestured at a jump seat to her left. "You may sit."

David wasn't quite sure what to make of the taciturn nun yet; he sat as instructed. "Thank you, Mother Superior." He took in the rest of the bridge. There were stained-glass dioramas throughout the bridge, showing nuns ministering to the sick, helping the oppressed, and several that showed them with weapons of various types, fighting off other soldiers, and in one, a demon.

David tried making small talk. "I'm very impressed with what you've done to this ship."

"It's been with us for many years now. As the flagship of our small fleet, we've tried to make it into a reflection of who we are and our values."

"How do you handle repairs after battle damage?" David asked.

"We typically do not get into ship-to-ship engagements; our assault landers aren't equipped for that kind of combat. They carry our drop pods, which can be jettisoned from orbit or closer to the surface and have limited anti-ship weaponry. That was part of my deal with General MacIntosh. We get a destroyer from mothballs in exchange for completion of the mission."

"A destroyer?" David asked, his eyebrow shooting up in surprise.

"I've wanted to be able to protect civilian shipping in the neutral areas of space for some time. Many groups of pirates prey on the weak. Even an older destroyer would be more than a match for them. We could do much good."

"You and your order certainly dream big, Mother Superior."

“There are always more good deeds to accomplish, but now we’ve got twelve ships to land and a military base to occupy. Are your compatriots settled?”

David nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Colonel Demood embedded himself with one of your platoons, while Colonel Amir is flying wing to your squadron leader, and everyone else is safely strapped in.”

“This reporter… do you know her?” Sarno asked.

“I’ve known her for several weeks now. I’ve never been a big fan of the press outside of Canaan News Network. I don’t like what I perceive to be a biased presentation of the facts.”

Sarno harrumphed loudly. “I think what you mean to say is that you don’t like a presentation of the facts that are negative against you.”

David smiled. “I suppose you might be right. I see the CDF as the one thing standing in the way of the League and total domination of our country. I’m sensitive to people who criticize it.”

“Allow me to make an observation on the human condition for you. We judge one another based on the outcome of our actions; we judge ourselves on the intent of our actions. Can you see what the problem might be?”

I’d never really thought of that before, David considered. “I suppose I can; we’re inherently lighter on ourselves.”

“Exactly, David. That is why Jesus charged us to judge no one, lest we be judged. Think about that.”

Deciding he didn’t want to engage in a debate about the merits of Jesus’ words, David simply nodded his head. Before too long, the old nun was too busy commanding her sisters as the formation of twelve ships made its initial descent toward Monrovia; so old were these ships that they couldn't do a direct “hot” insertion any longer. It would be several minutes before they were able to enter the atmosphere at a speed that wouldn’t cause them to burn up during reentry.

THE BUILDING which housed the parliament of Monrovia, as well as the prime minister's office, also had a less known but vital function. A bunker under it provided continuity of government and real-time monitoring of all space-based threats. Two plain-clothed bodyguards escorted Fitzroy in the large titanium door into the space beyond that was filled with high-tech electronic and communication equipment.

"Madame Prime Minister, welcome," a tall, broad-shouldered Caucasian man with graying hair wearing a Monrovian military uniform said as she entered.

"Thank you, General Monahan. What's going on?"

"Ma'am, we've detected a group of twelve transports trying to land on Monrovia. They refuse any attempt at communication, and our orbital assets show this emblem on the side," Monahan said, pressing a button and pulling up a holo-projected display that revealed a traditional cross in a red hue on the side of the otherwise white spacecraft. "These transports are old CDF ships. They haven't been outside of training operations in ten years. We believe someone besides the CDF owns them."

"Clearly allied with the Terran Coalition."

"That seems like a logical conclusion, ma'am. They also have a squadron of modern space superiority fighters escorting them. Those are brand new CDF issue. Again, showing IFF markers with the same cross design."

"Is the *Lion of Judah* still in orbit?"

"Yes, ma'am, though she's moving off to our Lagrange point, presumably to jump out. Her weapons aren't charged, nor shields energized."

"Great… they've got someone to invade us and convert us all to Christianity," Fitzroy said, jumping to a quick

conclusion based on the prominent cross display. “General, is the planetary defense grid online?”

“Our satellites are in standby mode, the control center is active, and the upgrades provided by the League’s advisors appear to be working normally, ma’am.”

“Then target the transports and destroy them,” Fitzroy snapped.

“Madame Prime Minister, are you certain? We haven’t been able to establish communications with them… I would hate to start an intergalactic incident by firing on transports that held medical supplies or prompted the *Lion of Judah* to intervene in the situation.”

“The *Lion of Judah* won’t get involved because the Terran Coalition doesn’t want another war. It’s not logical to believe that they’re sending medical supplies escorted by space superiority fighters. Now, unless you want to be removed from your post, investigated for treason, and thrown out of the military, blow those transports apart!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Monahan said, his voice tight. “Weapons free on the transports. Tell ground control to focus all fire on the ships; scramble our alert five interplanetary defense fighters to engage the escorts.”

Fitzroy’s voice dripped like fake sugar. “Thank you, General.”

THE BRIDGE of the *Michael* shook ferociously, and David had to grab on to his chair to avoid being tossed about. Alarm klaxons went off, and the nun that manned the tactical station hit her head on the console, leaving a bloody stain on the screen. Instinct and training took over; he jumped out of his seat.

Finding her pulse to be strong and steady, David glanced back at Sarno. "She's okay, Mother Superior. Just knocked out."

"Take the tactical station, please," Sarno said, steadying herself as the ship shook again.

"Yes, ma'am!" David was already in the process of detaching the nun's safety harness. With her out of the way, he slid into the seat and tried to make sense of the display. Much of it was different from the CDF standard interface he expected to see; some phrases were in Latin, others were simply different. After a couple of times of trial and error, he was able to run a scan. "Conn, TAO." He reverted to engrained procedure. "Multiple contacts are attacking us with energy weaponry categorized as small defense satellites."

"Target the nearest one and engage."

David picked the closest satellite; the *Michael* had limited anti-ship weaponry, which consisted solely of a single neutron-beam emitter. Lining up the shot, he waited for a firing solution, then pressed the button to fire. A single beam jutted out from the nun's ship; the satellites had limited shielding which was quickly burned through, and a moment later, it exploded into fragments.

"Satellite destroyed, Mother Superior."

"Target the next one," Sarno roared as the bridge shook.

David zoomed out on his tactical scan, trying to take in how many defense platforms the enemy had. *Oh, snap, they've got a lot of them.* "Mother Superior, the enemy has upwards of one hundred satellites. We don't have enough firepower to engage them all effectively."

"Suggestions, tactical?"

"Systems like this don't run on automatic...take out the control center with the fighters that are flying escort."

"Do it."

In the intervening seconds, David searched for the source of the transmissions that controlled the enemy force; a hardened building on the planet's surface that had numerous transmission dishes around it. "Conn, TAO. Control center identified."

Before Sarno could respond, the nun at the communications station called, "*Immacolata Concezione* is transmitting a distress signal, Mother Superior!"

David looked down at his console, zeroing on the assault lander by its IFF code, and seeing that it was under attack by multiple defense satellites. Before his eyes, the ship exploded. He sat back, forcing himself to stay on the mission. *Dear God, what have I done*?

13

SIMULTANEOUSLY, on the bridge of the *Lion of Judah*, Ruth watched the transport explode on her screen as well. "Conn, TAO! Sierra Seven destroyed!"

Aibek slammed his fist into the CO's chair, which he currently occupied. "TAO, set condition one throughout the ship." Immediately, the lights dimmed and turned blue. He punched up the ship-wide intercom and spoke into the mic. "Now hear this, now hear this. This is Colonel Aibek. Man your battle stations! I say again, man your battle stations!"

"Sir, do you plan to engage?" Ruth asked, hoping that Aibek would say yes.

"We are not to engage, Lieutenant, unless Monrovian forces target the *Lion of Judah*."

Ruth looked down at her screen to see the fighters they had given to the nuns suddenly peel away from the formation of transports and head into the planet's atmosphere. "Conn, TAO. Sierra twelve through twenty-four appear to be attempting a ground attack... pure conjecture here, sir, but I think they're going after the control center for the defense grid."

"Navigation, are computations completed for our Lawrence drive jump?"

“Yes, sir, coordinates are locked in, and we are ready to jump,” Hammond said.

Glancing down at her display, Ruth saw multiple missile impacts on a ground target, but all appeared to impact against an energy shield. “Conn, TAO. Negative impact on the Monrovian defense grid.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Aibek said briskly.

Ruth cranked her head around, breaking all kinds of bridge protocol. “Sir, with respect, friendly forces will be picked apart by the Monrovian’s defense before they can effect a landing. We can alter the situation with one well-placed neutron beam strike.”

“This planet is not at war with the Terran Coalition, and we are under orders not to intervene, Lieutenant.”

“We’re going to let Colonel Cohen and the rest of our shipmates die because of that?” Ruth practically shouted. “You’re always going on about Saurian honor, Colonel. Is this how you demonstrate it?”

Aibek’s face immediately flared and the scales on his head flushed. “Do not question my honor, Lieutenant Goldberg. I would do anything in the universe to save Colonel Cohen and the rest of the team.”

“Talk’s cheap, sir. One shot is all it would take,” Ruth said unflinchingly. *I’m going to get court-martialed, might as well go for the gold.*

“We don’t have clearance to fire on a neutral planet’s military, Lieutenant!”

“Fog of war, sir… perhaps we’re being targeted by the Monrovians as we spin up our drive. We reacted to deal with a threat,” Ruth said, making it up as she went along.

“That is a lie, Lieutenant.”

“One that is justified to do what’s right,” Tinetariro interjected.

Aibek whipped his head around to face her. “You too, Master Chief?”

“Just calling it like I see it, sir, since we’re not exactly going by customs, courtesies, or normal decorum right now.”

“Get me a firing solution on the complex that houses the defense grid control center, Lieutenant,” Aibek said after a few moments of silence.

Ruth turned back around and began to tap at her controls. “Conn, TAO. Firing solution achieved on enemy ground target, designated Master One, neutron cannons.”

“Navigation, can you affect a jump with our weapons capacitor still charged?”

Hammond glanced toward Ruth and made eye contact before answering Aibek. “Yes, sir, we can, though it’ll be far shorter than our destination.”

“TAO, you will shoot a split second before we jump; Navigation, the moment I give the order to shoot, wait two seconds, then jump the ship. Is everyone clear?”

“Aye aye, sir,” Ruth said quickly.

“Aye aye, sir,” Hammond responded.

“TAO, shoot, neutron cannons, Master One.”

“Conn, TAO! Monrovian ground control center destroyed!” David said, surprised by the sudden destruction of the enemy.

“How?”

“The *Lion of Judah* engaged as they jumped out. Defense satellites have deactivated. We’re clear to land.” Slumping back in the chair just a bit, David’s mind swam. A second ago, they would’ve had to abort, or been destroyed. Just like that, the tables turned. *I’ll have to remember to buy Aibek a*

bottle of that super sweet alcohol Saurians love, because I owe him big time.

"Remind me to thank your crew for you on the other side of this, David."

"I'll gladly do that, ma'am."

"You may retake the jump seat."

David looked behind him and saw that several new nuns had entered the bridge. He stood, and one of them immediately took the tactical station. He walked the few feet to the jump seat he'd previously occupied and strapped himself in. "The rest of the fleet looked banged up, but intact."

"Yes, intact enough to land and fight. We have a deeper problem, however. The ship we lost held few sisters, and I thank our Lord Jesus Christ for that. But it also had most of our medical supplies and ammunition stores. Without her, we can only fight for thirty-six hours, maybe forty-eight if we're cautious."

"I might be able to help with that too," David said, a small smile on his face.

Sarno shifted her gaze over to him, looking down her nose. "There's a part of me that might suggest you've already done enough."

"Before I left the *Lion of Judah*, I took steps to make sure I had a way to get things done. If you'd allow me to use the communication system as we land, I believe I can arrange for supplies to be dropped in by ship."

"The CDF isn't going to resupply us, David. If you think that, you're far more naïve than I thought."

"No, they won't. But Mr. Lowe —the contractor that handled loading the supplies onto your ships— is very creative. Let me try," David said, his voice direct and sure.

"I suppose no harm can come of that. Sister Maria, contact whoever David would like you to," Sarno said toward

the nun that sat at the communications terminal.

David stood up from the jump seat and made his way over to the console at which Sister Maria sat. “Sister,” he said as a greeting. “Can you send a transmission to this comm address?” He pulled out his tablet and showed her the address.

“Yes, Colonel Cohen. One moment.”

They sat in silence while the vidlink attempted to connect; fifteen seconds later, Kenneth’s bright and smiling face appeared on the monitor. “Colonel Cohen! What can I do for you, sir? Heard you guys ran into some trouble.”

“You could say that… tell Colonel Aibek I’m quite pleased he was able to help us.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Remember I said I might need some help from you?” David asked with a sheepish grin.

“Of course, sir. What do you need?”

“Medical supplies, ammo for battle rifles, spare parts… I can send a full list.”

Kenneth’s face clouded over. “Sir, where would you like me to obtain those parts from?”

“Combination of the ship’s stores and the open market.”

“Not to be indelicate, sir, but with what money?”

“The ship’s discretionary fund.”

Kenneth looked as if he was about to argue but thought the better of it. “Will you personally approve that, sir?”

“I’ll send the proper 1149 form if it makes a difference.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Do you know anyone crazy enough to try to drop the supplies to us?” This was the question David worried about the most.

“I know a guy… former CDF. Got cashiered out of the service, but he’s a good man. Always gets his cargo where he says he will, and there’s always a trick or two up his sleeve.”

David nodded. “Okay, use the same funds to pay him. I’ll approve that too.”

“You sure about this, sir?” Kenneth asked.

He knows I’m committing a crime by misusing what amounts to the Lion’s *petty cash, but we’re too far in now to stop.* “Yes, Kenneth. Quite sure.”

“Time frame, sir?”

“As soon as humanly possible, but within the next forty-eight hours.”

“Sir, I’m just a defense contractor, not a magician,” Kenneth said with an expression that belied his worry.

“Kenneth, I know it’s a big ask. I know it’s a short time frame, but if we don’t get the supplies, our attempt to help these people goes up in smoke. So, no pressure… just get it done.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“Of that, I have no doubt, Mr. Lowe. Good luck and Godspeed.”

“Same to you, sir,” Kenneth replied with a forced smile.

David nodded to Maria, and she cut off the connection. “Thank you, Sister.”

“Perhaps I underestimated your resourcefulness, David,” Sarno said as he walked back to the jump seat and sat down again. “Our first target is the primary Monrovian National Guard base on their southern continent. I chose that location because it’s the least populated area on the planet, and we need a logistical base of operations.”

“That makes perfect sense, Mother Superior. Logistics, after all, win wars.”

“Mother Superior! There are two squadrons of enemy aircraft on an intercept course with us!” the nun who had taken over the tactical station said, interrupting the conversation.

Sarno set her jaw. “Communications, order our escorts to engage the enemy craft. They are authorized to use all necessary force. Tactical, activate point defense and be prepared to defend against anti-ship missiles.”

David sat back in his chair; trying to be respectful of the nuns and especially Sarno, he decided not to offer any thoughts or ask if he could help. *If they need me, they’ll ask.* In the meanwhile, he prayed very quietly in Hebrew, asking God to spare the lives of the nuns and his friends, if it was His will.

While the ships plowed toward their target, Amir hurtled toward the flight of enemy fighters; he and eleven nuns who flew the rest of the squadron that the *Lion* had transferred to them. The SF-106 Phantom that he piloted had been optimized for in-atmosphere flight, as had the rest of them. They would perform better for close to the ground dogfighting, which he had expected to see quite a bit more of until at least the Monrovians realized how much technology influenced modern combat.

“Christus Vincit One to Christus Vincit Two,” came the voice of Sister Oni Arendse, the nun that served as the squadron commander.

“This is Christus Vincit Two, go ahead,” Amir said.

“Colonel Amir, thank you again for agreeing to fly with us,” she said with a thick accent that reminded Amir of Master Chief Tinetariro.

“It is my honor, Sister. What does Christus Vincit mean again?”

“Christ conquers. Yes, I realize the irony.”

“I take no disrespect, Sister. This is, after all, a Catholic military order. Don’t forget, we respect all people of the

book."

"As we honor you in turn. I have a request of you, Colonel."

"Of course, Sister."

"Will you take command of the squadron?" Arendse asked without preamble.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. I don't have enough time in this particular model to understand its capabilities fully. I prefer to follow you into battle and continue to train while giving my sisters the best leadership I can."

"I would be honored to lead you into battle, Sister. Will you inform the rest of the pilots?"

"Yes. Switch back to the squadron comm channel, Colonel," Arendse said.

Amir clicked the commlink over while mentally checking the sensor reading. Enemy contact would occur in less than three minutes, if the current rate of closure were maintained.

"Sisters, hear me. I've asked Colonel Amir to take over for me during this first battle. Our time in these fighters is limited, but our will to fight and defeat evil is not. Fight for God, fight for the innocent, fight for each other, and fight well."

Through the neural interface, Amir watched as Arendse tagged him as the squadron commander and moved herself to the XO role. One of the few areas of technology in which the Terran Coalition allowed any kind of neurological interface outside of medicine, it allowed a pilot to effectively control many aspects of the fight with his or her mind and gave them a decided edge in combat. Fighter pilots still had to fly using a flight stick and affirmatively pull a trigger or press a button to fire weapons, but nearly everything else was done via the neural interface.

“Christus Vincits,” Amir said, the words foreign on his tongue. “It is an honor to lead you into combat. Form up, four pilots to a group in a finger four formation. I’m sending you designations now; we are three minutes out from maximum engagement range. All pilots lock a target with your onboard fire control system. We will fire LIDAR-guided missiles at max range minus one hundred kilometers. Ensure that your electronic countermeasures are active at all times, and may Allah be with you.”

Amir watched the HUD and noted with satisfaction that, while the sisters might not have flown this specific type of fighter before, they knew their business. Three tight finger four formations emerged within seconds, and Arendse lined up as his primary wingman. The targeting systems didn’t allow for friendly fighters to overlap targets, so Amir locked on to one of the lead Monrovian fighters; the distance between them closed rapidly.

“*Allu Ackbah*,” Amir said quietly, his mic muted. “*Hasbunallaahu wa ni’amal-wakeel*,” he continued, reciting in Arabic a prayer for protection against evil; it meant *Allah is sufficient for us and the best on whom to depend*. It was one of his favorite prayers, and something he said before every combat. He mentally flipped the microphone back on. “We are fifteen seconds away from maximum range. Stand by to launch missiles.”

The missile lock tone sounded in Amir’s cockpit, and he waited an extra second for the next one hundred kilometers to pass. “Christus Vincit One, Fox three!”

There was a chorus of other voices, all announcing the launch of their missiles; Amir watched the HUD overlay as a dozen missiles tracked toward their targets. Warning tones sounded, and as he continued to fly toward the enemy, they launched twenty-four missiles in return. “Christus Vincits, break and attack!” Amir called into the commlink, pulling

his stick hard to the left to give the incoming missiles a target moving perpendicularly across space, a far harder thing to actively track and hit.

Then, the missiles they had launched began to hit. Amir's was the first to erase its target from the universe, turning the Monrovian fighter into a small cloud of debris; over the next few seconds, eleven out of twelve launched missiles destroyed their intended targets. Then it was the enemy's turn. Not a single weapon that was launched against them even came close; the ECM systems spoofed all missiles fired toward the Phantoms.

"Their missiles appear to be ineffective, Colonel," Arendse said through a private channel.

"Our ECM is working even better than I had dared hope, Sister. Now we finish this." Amir clicked the channel back to the entire squadron. "Sisters, continue to press the attack! The enemy will run before us!" Steering his fighter back toward the remaining enemy craft, he lined another one up in his sights and pulled the trigger the moment he heard the missile tone sound. "Christus Vincit, Fox three!"

Knowing that the only hope they had was to close to visual engagement range, the Monrovians pushed up to maximum speed and were able to get in close enough to trigger a furball—what fighter pilots referred to as a tight turning dogfight—but not before they lost five more planes.

"Sister, leave at least one more for me," Amir said in a light tone to Arendse on the private channel as he lined up behind one of the last remaining opposing fighters. "Christus Vincit, guns, guns, guns!" Miniature neutron cannon fire stabbed out from his fighter; one volley connected and blew the wing off his target. The fighter spun around several times, and he saw the pilot eject right before the craft exploded. "*Rahmatullahe alaihe*," he said into the open comm line.

“If I may, Colonel, what does that mean?” Arendse asked.

“It is an Arabic saying. It means, ‘May Allah have mercy on him.’”

“So true, Colonel.”

Rechecking the HUD to regain overall situational awareness, Amir noted that a single Monrovian fighter accelerated away at maximum speed. “We appear to be clear of hostiles, Sisters. Return to escort formation… good job.”

Amir flipped his craft around and lined up to intercept the *Michael*; on his way, he performed three barrel-rolls, a traditional custom of victory to celebrate his three hard “kills”; while it would take the gun camera and sensor feeds to confirm them, that put his personal score at two hundred and eighty-nine enemy craft destroyed in his career. *Subhaan Allah, Alhamdo lillah, Allahu Akbar*; another Arabic phrase that meant, “Glory to Allah, all praise belongs to Allah, Allah is the Greatest.”

14

INSIDE OF THE TRANSPORT *PACE*, which was Latin for "peace," Calvin found himself strapped into one of fifteen starboard assault pods. There were twenty armored nuns with him, led by an older woman who had leathery skin and looked as if she'd done this particular combat evolution countless times. Most of the younger nuns recited the rosary as the ship hurtled through the atmosphere, but he decided to strike up a conversation with the one who had been referred to as a nun commander by Mother Superior. "Sister Kaufman, I get the feeling this isn't your first rodeo."

"No, it isn't, Colonel Demood," Kaufman replied.

"Previous CDF experience?"

"Twenty-five years, Terran Coalition Marine Corps."

"Hoorah, Master Guns?" Calvin asked.

"I prefer not to dwell on my rank or occupation in the TCMC, Colonel, but yes… I was a Master Gunnery Sergeant, 4th Battalion, 3rd Marine division."

"You guys saw a lot of fighting," Calvin observed.

"Yes, we did."

"Forgive me for asking, but after twenty-five years, you've more than earned the retirement package. Why are you still fighting?"

Kaufman turned her head toward Calvin. “Because I needed to atone for my sins. Here, yes, I’m fighting, and to my shame, I’ve killed several people in service to the order. But I’ve saved far more. I’m trying to even the scale before I die.”

Calvin pursed his lips together. “Sister, I may be wrong here, but I thought the entire point was we couldn’t balance out the scales. I mean, that’s what my bible says anyway.”

“Are you seriously telling me you’ve never thought about it?”

“I have and haven’t. My job is to fight the Leaguers. I don’t feel too much in the way of remorse for killing the enemy.”

“And the innocent lives we’ve taken in the process of killing the enemy…what about them?”

“I try not to dwell on it, Sister,” Calvin said in his usual cocky Marine tone.

“I’m not sure if I envy you or pity you, Colonel. I can’t stop thinking about the things I did that were wrong… Mother Superior told me I have to let it go and forgive myself. Until I do, I can help the oppressed. That’s what we do, and we do it well.”

Calvin nodded. “Your training and abilities are quite impressive. I do have a question, though.”

“What’s that?”

Calvin gestured to the armored suits the nuns wore. “You guys are wearing white armored suits with red crosses on them. Your helmets have five red stones that reflect light. I get there’s some religious significance to the symbols, but you guys stick out like sore thumbs.”

Kaufman rolled her eyes in Calvin’s direction, and suddenly, her armor shifted color to a camouflage pattern. “Active camouflage pattern technology, Colonel. As for the rest, we want anyone to know who we are in a non-combat

situation readily. Hence the white armor with the cross. The red stones symbolize the five wounds of Christ. They remind us of our burden to help others."

"I see," Calvin said. "I'm non-denominational myself. When I go to church, that is."

Kaufman smirked slightly. "Given how you act, Colonel, I think you might need to go more often."

Calvin rolled his eyes back at her. "Sister, I'm a Marine. Marines cuss. Period. I drink too."

"We're all sinners."

"That we are," he said with a laugh.

"Now hear this, now hear this. Drop separation in thirty seconds!" boomed a voice that Calvin didn't recognize from the pod's intercom.

"Sisters, confirm you're properly strapped in and that your neighbor is strapped in. Colonel Demood, please ensure your weapon is loaded with stun rounds."

"I'd prefer to have armor-piercing rounds, if it's all the same to you, Sister."

Kaufman gave him a dirty look. "It's not. Stun rounds first, armor-piercing only if confronted by power-armored soldiers."

"Yes, ma'am," Calvin grated. *I'm here to shoot bad guys, not stun them.*

The light inside the cabin that denoted drop status suddenly switched from red to green, and a moment later, there was a split-second feeling of weightlessness as the pod entered freefall. Then, its thrusters kicked in, and he felt everything pressed into the floor at several Gs. Speaking during a drop was nearly impossible, and Calvin found himself watching the clock that indicated time to touchdown. They had detached relatively close to the ground, so there were only a few seconds to wait before the pod's retro-rockets fired, and they gently set down. Then the

doors to the pod snapped down, and the restraint systems automatically swung upward.

“Move out, platoon! Squad one, take starboard; squad two, take port! Move it!” Kaufman said, her Marine training showing through.

Calvin charged out behind her, his battle rifle at the ready, finger on the trigger guard. As he took in the Monrovian National Guard base, it shocked him at how rundown it looked. There were buildings in disrepair, vehicles parked that looked like they no longer ran, and a general lack of personnel. Not to say there were no enemy soldiers, however. A couple of sentries struggled to pull out sidearms and were quickly shot down with stun rounds before they could even get those weapons out of their holsters.

“Fan out, Sisters!” Kaufman shouted at the top of her lungs as other drop pods touched down around them; they were trying to use overwhelming force to quickly force the defenders back. Dozens more nuns flooded out of the drop pods, and Calvin scrambled to keep up with Kaufman’s pace as she and the first squad pushed forward. Coming out of a maze of buildings, they ran right into the middle of the central square, filled with Monrovian soldiers walking between buildings. Taken aback, he snapped up his battle rifle and started shooting the closest targets with stun rounds, as did the rest of the nuns.

An alarm sounded, and after momentarily freezing, the enemy began to react. Incoming fire kicked up dirt around Kaufman, and a couple of shots impacted her armor. Calvin took cover behind a helicar and reloaded his rifle. “Well, that was fun while it lasted.”

Kaufman slid down next to him and grunted. “Your idea of fun leaves much to be desired, Colonel,” she said before peering up over the helicar and firing on the approaching

Monrovians. More and more enemy troops streamed out of what appeared to be the main administration building, many of whom were armed, to Calvin's surprise. Additional nuns began to appear, and Kaufman directed them toward positions of cover. "Do we have drones on station yet?" she asked into her commlink.

Calvin didn't hear the response but figured it was a positive one as she handed him a small tablet.

"Colonel, direct in drone strikes on the largest clumps of enemy resistance," she ordered.

"What, you've got stun drones too?" Calvin asked in a snarky tone.

"As a matter of fact, yes, we do. They fire flash-bang grenades and will allow us to move forward."

"Hoorah," Calvin said, looking over the tablet; its controls were the same as many other drone systems he'd used over the years, and he quickly picked the largest concentrations of Monrovians and dropped munitions on them. A few seconds later, stun grenades went off, blinding the enemy. The nuns promptly jumped up and poured fire into the dazed defenders.

Most of the men in the square were cut down within ten seconds, and the sisters took up new positions, much closer to the doors of the large central building. Weapons fire gradually subsided, and the front door of the building swung open. A single woman walked out, holding a pole that had what looked like a white tablecloth on it. "Don't shoot!" she shouted.

Kaufman stood, then she made a hand motion to the nuns to hold and advanced on the woman; Calvin jumped up and joined her.

"Who are you people?" the woman, who wore a military uniform, asked in a bewildered tone of voice.

“I am Sister Emma Kaufman, representing the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense. We’re here to free the people of faith of your planet that are held in detention centers, deprived of liberty, and executed for their beliefs. Surrender now, and I give you my word of honor that we won’t harm those inside. If you don’t surrender, we’ll storm all the buildings on this base, and there will be severe loss of life. We’d greatly prefer not to have that happen.”

“You’re nuns?” the woman replied, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” Kaufman said with a trace of a smirk.

“Let me go back inside and ask the facility commander if he will agree. Will you allow us to leave?”

“No. You will be stripped of all weapons and detained through the end of this conflict. Again, you will be treated with respect and no harm will come to anyone as long as you behave properly and do not offer resistance.”

“Okay… give me a few minutes,” she said as Kaufman nodded. The woman disappeared back into the building, leaving the two of them standing there.

“You know, Sister, we might think about going back to cover,” Calvin mused.

“They’ll surrender.”

“Why are you so sure of that? God tell you from on high?”

“No, Colonel. Because whoever’s in charge cares about those under their command. The flag of truce proves that. Because we have three thousand combat sisters on the ground right now. They have a surveillance system for this installation; they must be able to see our tanks rolling off the heavy armor pods. There’s no way out for them; the only decent course of action is to surrender.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been in positions where I was outnumbered and outgunned, and I fought to the bitter end.”

“You weren’t fighting for a cause you knew was wrong either. At least some of these people know what they’re

doing is wrong, and I think the installation commander is one of those people."

"I hope you're right, because I'm not interested in being lit up like a Christmas tree."

Kaufman smirked but said nothing, waiting in silence until the door opened up again, and the same woman came back out holding the pole with its white tablecloth. "Sister?" she asked.

"Have you reached a decision?"

"Yes, Sister; we will surrender. What are your terms?"

"Come out one by one, hands in the air. Leave all weapons inside of the building and ensure that everyone is out before we sweep the building. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. I'll inform the general."

Kaufman glanced at Calvin as the woman walked back inside. "See, Colonel? Our first victory."

"It gets harder from here, Sister." He wasn't convinced the assignment wouldn't get out of control; seventy-five hundred nuns versus an entire planet weren't odds that he cared for. *But I can't let David run off and get himself killed.*

A FEW THOUSAND LIGHTYEARS AWAY, General MacIntosh sat down at his desk in his office onboard Canaan's primary military space station. Now leading an effort to create smaller, reproducible anti-matter reactors, his team had tripled in size. Glancing at the clock on the wall that read 0530 CMT, he reflected briefly on how the days got longer and the period to sleep got shorter. The one thing that MacIntosh insisted on was obtaining his first cup of CDF coffee for the day before opening his email and video message logs for the previous six hours. Taking a sip, he pressed his finger into the sensor to confirm his identity and watched as the screen

populated. A message marked as urgent from David jumped out at him, and he pressed a finger on it, pulling up the full text.

General MacIntosh,

I have decided to accompany the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense on their mission to Monrovia. I realize that I am disobeying a direct order and that there will likely be severe consequences for my actions. I also believe that as a Jew, a soldier in the CDF, and as a human being, I cannot turn aside. I have to try to help these people, no matter the cost. I have left Lt. Colonel Aibek in command, and he is proceeding at best speed to rendezvous with Admiral Kartal. Assuming the mission is successful, I hope to speak to you again soon. If it is not, I want you to know it was an honor to serve under your command. Good hunting and Godspeed.

– Colonel David Levi Cohen

MacIntosh had to read it twice to comprehend what David was saying fully; all the while, the anger inside of him continued to build. *What in the hell does he think he's doing? We can't just run off half-cocked on what we want to do, when we want to do it*, he fumed. *Then again, Andrew, you've pulled some stunts yourself, like waylaying President Spencer and getting his buy-off on the reactor plans.* As he thought, another message popped up, the sender information showing as Aibek's. *Oh great, what now*? MacIntosh pulled that message up to read.

General MacIntosh,

I am writing you to inform you that several members of the crew have requested leaves of absence, and I have approved them. Lt. Colonel Calvin Demood, Lt. Colonel Hassan Amir, Lt. Colonel Izmet Tural, Rabbi Kravitz, and the embedded reporter, Angela Dinman, have joined the Sisters of Divine Recompense and their cause to free Monrovia. CDFPER has been provided with proper documentation. The Lion of Judah *has rendezvoused with Admiral Kartal's fleet, and we are preparing to attack the League battlegroup formation as ordered.*

– Lt. Colonel Talgat Aibek

"You have got to be shitting me," MacIntosh said out loud after reading the message. Gripping his tablet with such strength his knuckles turned white, he flung the tablet across the room with enough force to damage the wall and shatter the usually durable piece of computing technology.

A moment later, his adjutant, Major Melanie Roberts, rushed in. "General, are you okay, sir?"

MacIntosh shook his head. "You know what the problem with putting an unorthodox idealist in charge of the largest, most capable warship ever designed by human beings is, Roberts?"

"No, sir."

"He goes off the reservation at the drop of a hat because he can't see the big picture! Worse, now we have no way of plausible deniability if the Monrovians win!"

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm a bit lost here."

MacIntosh opened his mouth then closed it. He waited a moment to calm himself. "You haven't been read in on the situation, so I can't tell you about it. I'm sorry too. I lost my composure."

"If I may, sir, you did want a unique commander for the *Lion*."

"That I did. Well, I've got the most unorthodox Orthodox Jew I've ever seen. I hope he doesn't mess this up because

it'll be a PR disaster if he does. That's the last thing we need right now. Our people's morale is up, the League is on the run. Any change to the negative will be catastrophic."

"Is there anything I can do to help, sir?"

"No. Just pray that God is looking out for our people," MacIntosh replied sourly.

"Always, sir."

"Carry on, Major."

Roberts nodded respectfully and walked out of the room, leaving MacIntosh to stare blankly at the wall. *Damn you, David, you better not have screwed up all the work we've spent all these years on with some misguided need to be a hero.*

15

The command shuttle's rear ramp swung down as Calvin glanced around the area. Dozens of sisters in battle armor lined both sides of the shuttle as both an honor guard and a real protection force. As the ramp continued to lower, he saw Mother Superior Sarno and her aides standing in their religious robes, wearing full habits. *Forget all the other sacrifices they make*, Calvin thought to himself. *How the heck can they stand wearing those robes in this kind of heat? It speaks to dedication almost as good as the Marines. Almost*. David stood at his right, both of them still wearing full combat armor and carrying battle rifles. *Colonel makes a halfway decent combat Marine. Put him through some training, and he might be able to keep up with a few of my recruits*.

As soon as the ramp touched the dirt, Sarno and the rest of the nuns walked out of the shuttle; Sarno was the first to set foot on the hard, red clay. Kaufman stepped forward and addressed her. "May the Lord be with you, Mother Superior."

"And also with you," Sarno answered.

Calvin brought himself to attention, as David had as well.

"Colonels, I see you made it safely," Sarno said, looking at David.

David smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Any word on getting some real bullets?” Calvin said, drawing a sharp look from Sarno.

“Remember the terms of our agreement, Colonel Demood. You will obey the rules of our order if you wish to fight with us.”

When he opened his mouth to send another zinger, Calvin thought the better of it. “Yes, ma’am,” he finally said, echoing David’s approach.

“Sister Kaufman, what is your assault element’s status?”

Kaufman stepped forward. “No fatal casualties, Mother Superior. We have full control over the base, and all enemy combatants have surrendered. Unloading of our gear and billeting of the sisters who have landed continues.”

“Very good,” Sarno said, nodding her head. “I would like to tour the facility.”

“Of course, Mother Superior. This way, please.” Kaufman gestured in front of her. “I would be honored to escort you.”

Calvin followed David’s lead and fell in behind the procession of nuns. “Sir, why are we tagging along?” he whispered into his ear.

“I don’t think we’ve got anything better to do,” David said, keeping his voice low to match Calvin’s.

They had trudged across half the parade ground when a younger nun ran up and presented herself in front of Sarno, curtsying. “I apologize, Mother Superior, but it is urgent.”

“What is it, child?” Sarno asked, her tone patient.

“Soldiers and a man who claims to command them have arrived at the gate. They claim to be our allies and wish an audience with you.”

Calvin watched as Kaufman and Sarno exchanged raised eyebrows. “Is our command tent erected?”

“That is still in progress, Mother Superior.”

“Then bring the leader of these purported allies to us in the hospital I was briefed we had taken control of. As it is secure, we will meet with him there.” Sarno turned back to Calvin and David. “Would you care to join us?”

“Yes, ma’am, we’d be happy to,” David said respectfully on behalf of both of them.

“Good. Sister Kaufman, please lead the way.”

The nuns marched quickly through the Monrovian military base, leaving Calvin impressed with the fact that what appeared to him to be an elderly woman could easily set the pace for a group of battle-hardened soldiers. The group passed through the entrance to the hospital, which was guarded by multiple sisters with battle rifles, as well as fixed heavy weapons emplacements, squad service weapons, and at least one anti-aircraft missile battery.

Kaufman led them to the lobby, crowded as it was with nuns carrying heavy equipment and supplies. Standing out though, was a distinct group of men. Several wore Monrovian military uniforms, while most of the others were clothed in unassuming civilian attire.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a well-pressed uniform stood up and walked confidently toward the group of nuns. *I can smell brass a mile away.*

“General Harvey Monahan, formerly the commanding officer of the Monrovian National Guard. Unknown to our civilian leaders and most of the people on our planet, also the leader of the resistance against Prime Minister Fitzroy and her band of murderous thugs,” he said while extending his hand out to Sarno.

Sarno looked down at Monahan’s hand, then took it in her own and shook it. “General, I will confess, I am most shocked at your appearance here.”

“There are people throughout the government and the military that abhor the actions of our leaders, Mother

Superior. I will begin by apologizing for firing on your vessels. I did so under penalty of being shot by the prime minister. There was simply nothing I could do."

"I understand, General. I am very thankful only a few of our sisters died when our supply vessel was destroyed."

"Do you plan to move against the government? My forces are set up in cells across the planet. We stand ready to help you topple this regime and restore order and humanity to Monrovia."

"We're not here to affect regime change, General. My order is here to liberate the camps and set up safe zones for humanitarian evacuations."

Monahan's face twisted, a clouded look of distaste momentarily displayed.

Calvin stared at him intently. *Yeah, he's about as thrilled about this as I am. We ought to be out there smashing the Monrovian government's heads in.*

"Mother Superior, I must protest that I don't see how we can save all the religious citizens on this planet without decapitating the government, the police, paramilitary units, and the National Guard. With those institutions neutralized, citizens that believe as we do would be free to express themselves once more and escape. Today, regardless of what faith you have or even if you question the idea that there is no higher power, you must hide that belief within you and mention it to no one, never write it down, and try to throw suspicion onto others. People are snatched from the streets and their homes in the dead of night. Our entire planet lives in a state of terror."

Sarno's face retained its mask of serenity, coupled with a harsh stare. "General, we are here to save lives, not take them. We will use the least amount of force required to complete our mission, and I will tell you for the last time that our order does not engage in regime change. If your

planet should rise up and remove its government, then perhaps that would be a different question. Today, again, we're here to liberate the camps and evacuate as many as we can."

"Is the CDF involved in this operation?" Monahan asked, looking directly at David as he spoke.

"Absolutely not. Those of us here, including me, Colonel Demood, Dr. Tural, and Colonel Amir, are strictly volunteers. We've all taken a leave of absence from our duties in the CDF."

"The Terran Coalition can't spare a few thousand soldiers?"

"General, our government isn't willing to declare another war right now."

"Yes, because we don't have any important minerals. God knows, if there were a supply of lithium on this planet, you'd do anything needed to safeguard the supply and make sure it flowed into your war machine," Monahan said, his voice testy.

"I speak only for myself, not the Terran Coalition. And I'm here, along with my fellows, to do whatever we can to help."

Monahan shifted his focus from David and back to Sarno. "Will you allow us to assist?"

"Any who wish to fight under our banner are welcome. However, you must agree to abide by the rules of our order. The first of these is that we avoid casualties at all costs. We use stun weapons when at all possible. Your soldiers must agree to this condition, or we will not fight side by side with them."

"And how exactly do you stun enemy aircraft?" Monahan said, his tone sour and sarcastic.

"We don't. There are areas we accept must include death, and we will use lethal force if and when it is required. Until

that time, we avoid casualties. Are we clear, General?"

Calvin found it difficult not to snicker. *She must've been a TCMC senior drill instructor. That general just had poop thrown all over his brass, and she told him to polish it up to boot.*

"We're clear, Miss—"

"You may address me as Mother Superior Sarno or simply Mother Superior."

"Yes…Mother Superior," Monahan finally grated out.

"I believe if we agree, I will take my leave of you all for prayer and supplication for our mission."

"Of course."

Calvin thought he looked eager to get out of the room. *I would be too.*

"I will meet you all later in the command tent," Sarno said before turning away, her robe sweeping after her.

"That is one tough lady," Calvin said after the nuns had departed. "Had to be a Marine."

David smirked. "Because only Marines are tough?"

Monahan crossed his arms in front of him. "This business of not using lethal ammunition is silly."

"It's their party, General. We're just tagging along," David said.

"Yeah. Well, it's my planet. I've been fighting here a heck of a lot longer than any of you. I'm going to go collect my troops and get them situated."

"Good luck, General," David said while extending his hand. Monahan took the offered hand and shook it before walking out.

"Pleasant fellow," Calvin said.

"After what he's been up to the last however many years? I'll give him a pass."

"Fair enough."

"How about we go find some grub?"

Calvin grinned. “Now you’re speaking my language, Colonel.”

“We’re off duty. The name is David.”

“Yeah… I’m a Marine. Sir.”

David laughed. “Let’s go.”

A FEW HOURS after General Monahan revealed himself to be the leader of the resistance movement and sent shockwaves through the CDF team and the nuns, David found himself walking through the military installation they had captured. Some sisters were busy marching prisoners into holding areas, while others erected static defenses and brought air defense systems online. The hospital attracted his attention again, even though he’d been there earlier in the day, thanks to Dr. Tural’s presence outside, directing traffic.

Adjusting his path, David made his way over to the doctor. “*Salaam-Alaikum*, Dr. Tural.”

“*Wa-Alaikum-Salaam*, Colonel Cohen,” Tural said. “How are you doing, sir?”

“I’m honestly a bit shocked we survived the trip down.” David cracked a smile. “It was more than touch and go there for a moment.”

“I’m thankful at times that my place is deep within the ship; I rarely know how close we all come to dying daily.”

“Mother Superior told me they lost most of the medical supplies. How bad is the situation, honestly?”

Tural shook his head. “Not good, sir. I thank Allah we managed to take this hospital intact for the most part, and while we don’t want for basic medical supplies, the more advanced materials, especially for battlefield wound treatment, are lacking.”

“I’ve set in motion obtaining new supplies, but it’s going to be at least thirty-six hours before they arrive.”

“The sisters have also insisted on treating all enemy combatants and civilians.”

“I can see that… they’re even more stringent on saving lives than we are. Calvin was complaining loudly to me a few minutes ago that he’s not allowed to use lethal ammunition except against vehicles and power armor.”

“I am concerned that we won’t have enough supplies left to treat our casualties. The sisters will undoubtedly suffer combatants wounded in action,” Tural insisted.

“Doctor, I hear you. But to these folks… all life is sacred. Period. They’ve got a very rigid code of honor. You or I aren’t changing it… besides, I’ve known you to insist on treating all wounded, regardless of who they are.”

“Of course… that’s my duty as a doctor. I must treat all patients without regard for who they are or what they’ve done. However, this is a situation where I would invoke the proverb of trust in Allah but tie your camel to a tree.”

David laughed. “You grew up on New Arabia, didn’t you?”

“One of its moons, sir. A heavy G environment that had approximately 1.3 normal earth gravities.”

David frowned. *Heavy-G causes all kinds of health problems. He’s lucky to be alive*. “That must have been hard.”

“Yes, it was. My younger brother didn’t survive. It tested my faith and still does to an extent. You see, I think my parents believed that Allah would grant us a miracle because of our faith. I’ve come to believe that God helps those that help themselves, as one of my Christian friends put it.”

“That’s not for me to judge, Doctor,” David said. “But here, we’ve got an opportunity to help people. I think these nuns are the best opportunity we have to do that, right here, right now, on this planet.”

Tural nodded his agreement but did not speak.

“Can you get me a list of supplies we need in advance of a more formal resupply mission?”

“Yes, of course. Do you have something in mind?”

“Well, this planet has drug stores, warehouses, and military bases. If we need things, let’s shop local first,” David said with a smirk.

It was Tural’s turn to laugh. “Colonel… I have to say, I love how you put a positive spin on the worst situations.”

“I haven’t always been that way. Blame Colonel Aibek, our recent success in the war, and a changing of perspectives after Sheila died.”

“Do you still believe she appeared to you?”

David turned his head to the side and peered at Tural. “Some days, yes…some days, no. Honestly, I try not to dwell on it. All I know is that what happened that night gave me the strength to carry on. Since then, the things that have happened have continued to give me that inner strength we all so desperately need.”

“I wish I’d been able to give you a more definitive answer.”

David shrugged his shoulders. “The Torah makes clear that we have to accept some things by faith. Miracles imply faith, and not everything is explainable. How we define the margins… is our faith. I look at our universe and the mystery of how we arrived here and believe an all-powerful being explains it. An atheist thinks it’s random chance. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? I guess we’ll find out when we die, but my faith is unshakeable.”

“Not even in the face of horrendous loss?”

“No. The Lord gives; the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord,” David replied to Tural’s puzzled expression. “The book of Job.”

“I see, sir. Well, I’d better get back to setting up this hospital properly. It won’t do itself.”

“Good luck, Doctor. I’m going to grab a bite to eat and attend the briefing the sisters have called for to discuss our strategy. I’m curious to see what insights General Monahan can offer… this is, after all, his planet.”

“*Ila’liqaa’*, Colonel,” Tural said, an Arabic expression for “until we meet again.”

16

Calvin walked through the flaps of a large tent bearing the symbol of the cross; for some reason, the sisters wanted their HQ operation outside of the administration building on the military base and were adamant about using only the equipment they had brought with them. David and General Monahan had already arrived, as had Sarno and several younger nuns, whom he recognized as what passed for platoon and company commanders, including Kaufman. They still had their battle armor on but had changed it back to an all-white configuration and exchanged their helmets for habits. The juxtaposition of battle armor, nuns' habits, and gleaming battle rifles were more than a bit jarring, even for Calvin, who had thought he'd seen just about everything at his age.

"Mother Superior, Sisters, Colonel," Calvin said in greeting.

Sarno glanced up at him. "Thank you for joining us, Colonel Demood."

David inclined his head and shifted to one side, leaving a space for Calvin to stand that he gratefully took. They gathered around a large table with a map —an old-school paper map at that— of the planet's surface. Different colored

pins showed Monrovian troop concentrations, camp locations, and large supply centers. Dr. Tural and Amir entered together, taking open spaces up near the far side of the table.

"I believe we are ready to begin," Sarno said, looking about the room. "Let us pray."

Calvin bowed his head and closed his eyes as the older nun spoke once more.

"Lord God, there is nothing that is beyond Your power, there is nothing beyond Your will. Bless our purpose here today, and help us to protect the oppressed, comfort those who are hurt, and strike fear into the hearts of those who would oppose your will. Bless those who stand with us and thank You for watching over us in our last battle. May we all serve You today in Your will, Amen."

"Amen!" Calvin said with gusto while all those around murmured the same.

"I would first like to commend all involved for the success of our first engagement. All of you performed superbly, and in so doing, brought honor to the name of God and His commandments. We stand here now to decide on our next actions. Sisters, I know it is unusual to see outsiders among our ranks, but as they've fought beside you, I believe they showed their worth. So we will today ask for their counsel as well."

David nodded and respectfully inclined his head. "Thank you, Mother Superior. We are here but to serve."

"Our first order of business must be to begin to free those held in the internment camps established by the Monrovian government," Sarno stated. "I believe that by doing so, we can bring hope to those still in bondage, increase the number of soldiers who support us, and show this wicked government that it cannot bind those who have faith any longer."

Dr. Tural cleared his throat. “Mother Superior, do you intend to use prisoners from the camps as combatants?”

“There are only seventy-five-hundred of us versus a fifty-thousand-person strong military force. So yes, Doctor, I’m looking for all the additional troops I can get.”

“Those people will likely have been starved, mistreated, and will be unable to fight without rehabilitation, food, and rest,” Tural said forcefully.

“I think what the doctor is trying to say is that anyone we get out of those camps won’t be that useful to a war effort,” David amplified.

Monahan shook his head and crossed his arms. “I would have to disagree, Colonel. Military-aged men and women are inside those camps. I’m sure they held up better than the rest and might be willing to pick up a weapon and help free their fellows.”

“With all due respect, General… after a human being is starved and left without proper nutrition and exercise, the muscles atrophy. If they’re starved enough, the body begins to shut down.”

“So we feed them, Doctor,” Monahan said, directing a bored look at Tural.

“If we feed them normal food in that state, it would kill them. I’ve served in liberated League gulags, General. We lost twenty percent of our patients even with the best medical care available to us. By Allah, it would be against every medical ethic to ask these people to go out and fight.”

“The sanctity of human and alien life is extraordinarily important to us, Doctor,” Sarno said. “Is it not possible, however, that some of these people will be in something approaching decent shape?”

“It’s possible, but I don’t want us going into it thinking we’ll get an army out of the rescues. The first objective must be to do no harm.”

“Then we agree,” Sarno stated before changing subjects. “What of our supplies, Colonel Cohen?”

“Twenty-four to thirty-six hours away, Mother Superior. I’ll contact my guy tonight and confirm the details.”

“Your guy?” Monahan said in a mocking tone.

“Civilian defense contractor. Reliable and discreet. I’m confident he’ll get the supplies in here that we need.”

“Then we have the subject of tactics to discuss. There are two main options here; we attack the camps and save as many as we can, or we could use our strength to attack government and military targets and try to bring down this government,” Sarno explained.

David pointed to the nearest concentration camp on the map. “I strongly suggest we stick to liberating the camps for now, outside of strikes required to decrease their force effectiveness, Mother Superior.”

“I disagree. We need to hit the Monrovian government as hard and as fast as we can and topple it. After that, nothing else matters,” Monahan said.

“General, we don’t have the strength to do it. We have an island of superiority right now where we control the ground and air. Your stratofighter and space fighter strength is nearly three hundred craft. We’ve got twelve,” David shot back.

“Your twelve are so advanced, our planes can’t even target them.”

“Until they run out of missiles and get into visual range. No, sir, I cannot support that course of action. I believe we should stage a few hit-and-run attacks, mostly on airbases that house platforms capable of projecting power, and as much as possible stick to saving the innocents. And if you want to get cynical about it, pictures of half-starving people being ferried back here for medical treatment plays a hell of a lot better on the holochannels than pictures of dead

Monrovian soldiers, followed by them claiming we're religious terrorists."

Calvin shifted his feet. *Heh, David sure doesn't pull any punches. I gotta admit, I like his style*. "I've got to back the colonel a hundred percent here, ma'am. This fight is as much about optics as it is the battlefield. I do enjoy shooting bad guys, preferably in the head, but this time, I think we need to focus our attention on the camps."

Sarno cleared her throat. "I appreciate your input, gentlemen. My order came here to liberate the oppressed people on this planet. After considering all points of view, the only viable way I see forward is to liberate as many camps as we can, as fast as we can. I am, however, very interested in degrading Monrovia's ability to project offensive military power at us. Sister Arendse, have you reviewed the intelligence reports as to where the enemy stores its bombers and strike-capable fighters?"

"Yes, Mother Superior. They have about sixty bombers. Most of their fighters can carry bombs and ground attack missiles. The bombers, however, represent the most dangerous target. At least fourteen of them can launch large numbers of cruise missiles," Arendse said, speaking for the first time since the meeting began.

"I would recommend we use our entire force to strike at this threat," Amir interjected. "Two fighters on overwatch with anti-air munitions, the rest outfitted with as many pinpoint bunker penetration munitions as they can carry. If we get lucky, we'll take out the entire force on the ground."

"I don't believe in getting lucky, Colonel," Sarno said with a sour expression. "What would you say the odds are of actually accomplishing that feat?"

"Less than twenty percent, Mother Superior. A more likely outcome is we take out sixty to seventy percent of the bomber force."

“What are the odds that the Monrovian Air Force outfits itself for ground attack missions and comes after us, General?” David pointedly asked of Monahan.

“Fitzroy is insane. She’ll order everything she’s got at us. The only reason they’re not attacking now is their bombers are typically outfitted for anti-capital ship attack in space. It will take some time to get the right missiles and bombs out of storage and rearm them.”

“Then we’re agreed,” Sarno said. “Sister Arendse, I want your squadron wheels up as soon as possible.”

Amir raised his hand. “If it’s all the same, I’d like to fly with the attack force.”

“That’s Sister Arendse’s decision.”

“I’d be grateful for Colonel Amir’s support, Mother Superior.”

“Good. You all know what needs to be done. Get to it, and may God have mercy on our souls,” Sarno said, adjourning the meeting.

Monahan was the first person out of the tent, followed by Sarno, and the rest of the sisters. Calvin, David, Tural, and Amir were left behind. “Anyone want to take bets on our chances here?” Calvin asked cheerfully.

“I’m more worried about the logistics than anything right now. It’s going to take these guys some time to regroup. If we keep pouring on the pressure, it’ll keep them off balance. My concern is that we lose focus and turn this into a regime-change operation,” David replied.

“Surely you don’t believe that the rulers of this planet should be allowed to stay in power?” Amir said, his tone one of disbelief.

“Of course not, Hassan,” David began. “But we don’t get to make those changes. The mission the nuns signed up for is the same as the one I signed up for: save the innocents. If General Monahan and his resistance folks want to keep

fighting, all power to them. Personally, I think they should cut bait, come with us, and we'll deal with Monrovia after we're done with the League."

"People do not like to give up their homes, Colonel," Tural stated as if he knew from experience what he was talking about. "They become irrational; they cling to hope that isn't real. The rebels are no different."

David just shook his head. "I feel for them, Doctor. But we've got to avoid mission creep. I know you all are doing your best to be force multipliers. I think we've struck a good balance between offering advice and not getting in the way of the Mother Superior. So keep it up."

"Yes, sir!" Calvin said crisply.

"Of course, sir," Hasan replied.

"I will do my best," Tural finished.

"Thank you. Now move out."

The rest of them scattered, and Calvin found himself walking toward what they would have called the warrant-hole on a Marine base, where all of the shuttles were parked. *I'm going to suit up and see if Kaufman will have me along again. Who would have thought it? A few officers and bunch of nuns wiping the floor of a whole lot of bad guys. Maybe there really is a God.* He smirked to himself. *I know I say that a lot. I wish I saw something more of Your intervention on something like a daily basis.* He glanced up at the sky for just a moment before resuming his progress.

Meanwhile, on the *Lion of Judah*, Kenneth Lowe entered his small cubbyhole of an office deep in the bowels of the ship. He had spent most of the day rounding up supplies and trying to avoid an increasing number of questions about why he was so secretive. *I even had to lie to the people who work for*

me. Just can't let them get caught up in this in case there are repercussions.

Sitting down at his desk, Kenneth noted with satisfaction that he'd been able to obtain all of the supplies David had asked for; now he just had to find a way to get them to Monrovia safely and on time. Looking through his contact list, one name jumped out at him: James Henry. Captain Henry owned the *Shadow Wolf*, an independent freighter that he'd employed on a previous contract to move a cargo of munitions. There was a black mark next to his name from being cashiered out of the Coalition Defense Force, but Kenneth had been impressed with him when they met. Pulling up the vidlink profile, he sent him a request that began with, "Have a cargo for you to move on short notice. Good pay."

It didn't take long for the vidlink to go through; James Henry's face appeared on the monitor, a grin creasing his lips. "Well, I'll be... Kenneth Lowe... I haven't heard from you in two years. How are you?" he asked with hardly a trace of an accent to give away his birth; his skin tone indicated that somewhere he had relations in what was once known as Africa.

Kenneth smiled in return. "Oh, I'm okay. Been keeping myself quite busy."

"I hear you're working on the *Lion of Judah* these days."

"Guilty as charged. Been assigned to the ship for about eighteen months now."

"I doubt this is a social call, given your comm request language. Might make a guy like me think you're a bit desperate," Henry said, getting down to business quickly.

"Yeah... I need someone with your special skills."

Henry smiled broadly. "Which set?"

"Getting in and out of a tight place without drawing attention to yourself. I've got a cargo of medical supplies,

munitions, and spare parts for delivery to a planet."

"Is this planet in the League of Sol?"

"No, it's not."

"Why can't you have the CDF drop it in for you, then? It can't be as simple as delivering a cargo. Never is with you defense contractors."

"Well, the planet in question is Monrovia."

Henry's jaw dropped open. "You want me to fly into an active war zone… wait a minute, the CDF is supplying those nuns?" he asked with a tone of disbelief. "I thought it was a joke when I first heard the holonet broadcast."

"No joke. But they need supplies, and I have them ready."

Henry narrowed his eyes, staring at Kenneth through the commlink so intently, he thought the man was looking into his soul. "Is this a sanctioned CDF op?"

"No, James, it's not."

"I want quadruple my normal charge."

Kenneth's face twisted. "I don't have that kind of cash! Double is the best I can do."

"You're obviously getting money from somewhere. Get more."

"I can't… I've got a specific amount to work with, no more."

"Three times my normal charge."

"Best I can do is two and half times," Kenneth said.

"Not good enough… besides, I can tell from your facial expression that you're holding out on me."

Ugh, I have to do something about my crap poker face. "You've got a deal at three times your normal rate."

"See, wasn't that easy?" Henry replied, back to a grin.

"Why do you have to charge so much to do this anyway? It's for a good cause."

"Oh, I'm sure it is, which is why I'll do it in the first place. But my ship, my crew…we have expenses," Henry said, again

with a grin on his face.

Kenneth shook his head in mock exasperation. “I’ll transfer half the funds when you pick up the cargo, half on successful delivery.”

“Deal. Send me the coordinates and a time to pick up. See you soon, Kenny boy.”

17

David glanced at Calvin, both strapped into seats onboard what had just a few days previously been a TCMC assault shuttle. Now it was owned by the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense, and hurtling toward its target—a Monrovian concentration camp—on the lesser populated southern continent. They had pretty good intelligence from Monahan about its general layout, and the shuttles were prepped to destroy the guard towers before the landing commenced.

"Can you believe we're doing this, Colonel?" Calvin asked, a broad grin evident on his face.

"Not really. Can't say I got up a couple of days ago thinking I'd be running ground ops in civilian attire with a group of nuns."

Most of the nuns that shared the shuttle with them were quietly praying or reflecting.

"You trying to say nuns can't fight, Colonel Cohen?" Kaufman asked with a wicked grin on her face that was barely visible to David through her helmet's visor.

"Hey, I won't lie. I never thought the words 'fighting' and 'nun' went in the same sentence. But you ladies have made me a believer."

"Good save, Colonel," Kaufman said, still wearing a grin.

“Fifteen seconds from touchdown!” the voice of the shuttle’s pilot called out, and the lights dimmed to red.

“Semper Fi, do or die!” Calvin shouted. “Now let’s give these Monrovians some…” He stopped in mid-sentence, seemingly searching for a word that wasn’t profanity.

“Let us stop them from doing evil, and then try to save their souls,” Kaufman corrected.

“Uh, yeah, that.”

David just laughed. “Colonel Demood, you’re out of your element.” The craft’s forward movement came to a sudden stop, throwing everyone to the side before the telltale settling of the shuttle began, indicating it was about to land. A few seconds later, the back ramp began to drop, and the harnesses they were in automatically released.

“Move out! Squad one, secure our LZ! Squad two, on me!” Kaufman bellowed.

Kaufman was the first person out of the shuttle, but David and Calvin weren’t far behind. All told, there were twenty-five friendly combatants pouring out of that shuttle, and they did it like a well-oiled machine. Several rounds that appeared to be fired by enemy troops smacked the ground around David; none of the bullets connected. Quickly scanning the area, David saw row after row of barracks, surrounded by a wall with an electrically-charged fence on top. Guard towers had ringed the field, but they appeared to be smoking ruins now; the ones left intact were on fire. The nuns fanned out in a manner reminiscent of the best trained CDF Marines David had ever seen; the few Monrovian troops out in the open were quickly cut down by the sisters’ battle rifles firing stun rounds.

As David began to get his bearings and decide on which building to toss a grenade into and storm first, a single, higher caliber shot rang out with a loud report. One of the nuns a few feet from David fell to the ground in a heap; a

spurt of bright red from the center of her chest showed that she'd been shot with armor-piercing ammunition. A few seconds later, another nun fell in the same manner.

"Sniper! Smoke! Smoke!" Kaufman shouted, pulling out a grenade off her armored suit and tossing it; it hit the ground and spun, and red smoke spewed out of it.

David hurled a smoke grenade, alongside the other nuns. Within seconds, red clouds obstructed the entire battlefield.

"Any idea where that came from, Demood?" Kaufman said over her commlink.

"Yeah, Sister. My HUD got a location on the shooter. If you keep them occupied with suppressive fire, Cohen and I will circle around and flank them."

"Might be nice if you asked your superior officer before telling everyone what we will be doing, Cal," David groused, using Calvin's nickname to ensure it came across as a joke.

"All joking aside, I want to put a round into the head of a man who's willing to shoot women from cover," Calvin replied, his voice testy.

A mark appeared on the HUD inside of David's helmet, showing the general location of the hidden shooter. "That's a bit of selective outrage, don't you think? We use snipers to great effect too. Or is it that they're all women?" David asked as they moved forward through the smoke toward the building indicated.

"Hey, I'm old school. Never set right with me to see women get killed."

David thudded to a stop, peering quickly around a corner to see the building in range. "Me either. One of the realities of war, though."

"Well, look who's all grown up and sounding like a soldier," Calvin said sarcastically.

"Coast clear... You got a drone on you? We can use the infrared mode to sniff him out."

“Why’s it got to be a him? Could be another woman.” Calvin pulled a tiny box off his belt that contained a miniature drone that was the size of a fly. He opened up the case, and the drone instantly synched up with his armor suit, providing telemetry data and a visual feed. Using a small handheld control, he expertly maneuvered the drone and began to scan the windows for the sniper.

David looked down the scope of his battle rifle, manually scanning each window for any apparent signs like an open shade, but the going was slow.

“Gotcha, jerk,” Calvin muttered. “Third window from the left, top floor.”

David shifted his aim up and quickly found the indicated window. “Got a target. Tango with long rifle perched in the window. That’s our sniper.”

There were sounds of a magazine being ejected from Calvin’s battle rifle, which caused David to glance over. “Changing bullet types?”

“Yeah. AP rounds make a nice hole in the helmet armor.”

“Doesn’t exactly line up with non-lethal means.”

“I’m not wasting a perfectly good shot on some BS non-lethal bullet. This guy is going down hard.”

David shrugged; he didn’t care enough to argue. In truth, the Monrovian deserved whatever was coming his way. “No movement on the target.”

“This one’s mine, Colonel,” Calvin said, dropping to a prone position and taking aim. “Adios, mother…” He didn’t finish the curse and squeezed the trigger.

David watched the soldier jerk through his scope as the bullet hit him in the direct center of his head.

“Nice shot. Since when don’t you cuss like a proverbial sailor?”

“Since we’re around a bunch of nuns. Seems…wrong somehow.”

David snickered quietly. “So that’s what I need to do to clean up your act…put a nun in the wardroom.”

“I’d get over it eventually,”

David keyed his comm to Kaufman’s channel. “Sister Kaufman, the enemy sniper has been neutralized.”

“Thank you, Colonel,” Kaufman said.

As the two men covered the front of the building, the rest of the nuns came running through the smoke. David watched as they leapfrogged from cover to cover and fired into most of the windows and openings, though there were no visible targets. He realized this would serve to suppress the enemy force, and there was little danger of long-term harm to civilians thanks to the use of stun rounds. *Perhaps they’re onto something with this non-lethal force bit.*

Kaufman trotted up to the dumpster that David and Calvin had taken up position behind. “Thank you, gentlemen. I do detest snipers.”

“Any time, Sister,” Calvin said in his self-assured Marine voice.

“Orders?” David asked.

“We’re going to press forward to pin down the remaining guards in their barracks and ask them to surrender.”

“How about we just call in an airstrike on them and go home?” Calvin asked.

Kaufman ended up rolling her eyes. “Stubborn as an ox, Colonel.”

David laughed. “Just tell us where to be.”

“I’d like you two to provide security for the medics that are coming up behind us now; get into each of these bunkhouses and help as many people as we can.”

“With respect, Sister, I’m a lot better at shooting things than administering first aid and passing out food,” Calvin retorted with his trademark grin.

“Demood… I don’t want you to forget what kind of ammo you’re using again accidentally. Best way to do that is to handle the rest of this op our way and have you take care of rear security,” Kaufman responded in a direct tone of voice that belied her annoyance.

“Are you kidding me?” Calvin said, his face turning red. “That guy was picking you off one by one. TCMC would have simply leveled the building. That’s how you treat hostile forces.”

David put his hand on Calvin’s shoulder. “Hey, it’s their op. We do it their way. Those were the terms we agreed to. Regardless if you or I agree, the sisters place a great deal of importance on the sanctity of human life. Now let’s provide overwatch as she asked.”

Calvin came to attention. “Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, Colonel Cohen. And, Demood… thanks for tagging that sniper. This is a hard row to hoe sometimes, especially when I see my friends get wounded or killed.”

Calvin nodded begrudgingly. “No problem.”

David took Calvin by the arm, and they walked off to meet up with the swarm of medics that were entering from a recently landed shuttle. As they did, David heard a sonic boom. A voice he didn’t recognize cut into the comm feed. “We have enemy aircraft closing on our position rapidly. Request assistance from any friendly air assets!”

To punctuate the warning, the ground rattled as an explosion rocked the camp, somewhere off to the right. While David didn’t see the actual strike, he saw the aftermath; a fireball and smoke curling up from it. It didn’t take either him or Calvin more than a second to reach the same conclusion; find cover as soon as possible. They took off at a run toward the nearest bunkhouse.

18

"This is David Cohen to any friendly air assets. We're under attack by Monrovian bombers!"

Amir did a double take at hearing his friend's voice. "This is Colonel Amir. Can you provide any further details?" He was in formation with five other fighters, having just successfully bombed an enemy airfield.

"We're getting lit up by enemy air, Hassan! Are you anywhere in the vicinity?"

"They're four minutes away from us, Colonel," Arendse's voice said through the commlink. "I've got a general distress call going out from the onsite sister militant. You got any air-to-air missiles left?"

"I have one LIDAR tracking missile remaining, as well as my neutron cannons," Amir answered. "What about everyone else?"

"About the same. Several of us are Winchester except for the energy weapons." Winchester was the code phrase for being out of munitions. "That'll have to be enough. Christus Vincits, break to heading 165, stand by to engage hostile aircraft!"

Amir adjusted his heading as soon as Arendse spoke; he had planned to regardless of her orders. *Leaving David and*

Calvin alone and without support isn't happening on my watch. "Christus two acknowledged, steady on new heading 165." The squadron had collectively decided to shorten their callsigns to Christus; the full name was simply too long for the chaos of combat. "Colonel Cohen, we're on the way. Hold fast!" he said back to the channel David had broadcasted from; there was no reply.

"Colonel, I am thinking we fire our remaining missiles at long range, then push it up to max thrust and close in," Arendse said on a private channel.

She's getting confidence in tactics and her fighter; very good. "That's exactly what I'd do, Sister," Amir smiled inside of his flight helmet. "I believe we can scatter their formations, then pick them off one by one."

"Sounds like a plan to me, Colonel," Arendse replied, mirth in her voice.

"Let's make our first volley count," Amir said, watching the range decrease rapidly with the blob of Monrovian bombers. "I show missile range in thirty seconds!" *Allah, please protect my friends and the sisters from the enemy.* The wait as his fighter closed to missile range went by in an agonizingly slow manner. It seemed like an eternity had gone by before the familiar tone of LIDAR missile lock sounded on the nearest bomber. "Christus two, Fox three!" Amir yelled, pressing the missile launch button.

The missile dropped free from the underside of Amir's fighter, its rocket engine kicking on and it roared away at Mach ten toward its hapless target. A few seconds later, the rest of the fighters fired the few air-to-air missiles they had left; five in total. He also saw two surface launches from what he assumed were air defense systems the sisters had onsite. The Monrovians attempted to deploy Chaff and spoof the incoming weapons with ECM, but as before, their technology was utterly ineffective. All five launched missiles

connected with their targets; wings blew off aircraft, engines exploded, and five out of twenty-eight bombers were destroyed.

“Christuses, break and engage!” Arendse said as her shout filled the comm channel.

Amir quickly discovered that his fighter was a lot faster than the enemy bombers, and in turn had to slow down by nearly six hundred kilometers per hour. *It’s hard to fly this slow without stalling out in a modern space fighter, even when it’s optimized for atmospheric flight*. Sliding in behind one of the lumbering bombers, Amir said, “Christus two, guns, guns, guns!” into his mic, even as his finger pulled the trigger. Several direct hits later, another Monrovian craft exploded. He pushed the throttle forward, which increased his forward speed and pressed his body back into the specialized pilot's chair from the G-forces.

The next target was the nearest bomber; Amir turned into its path and met it head on, firing his neutron cannons. Once again, the Monrovian craft exploded in mid-air, its debris raining down on the ground below. Pausing to view an overlay of the battlefield in his HUD, Amir saw they were getting the best of the bombers; now there were only nine left. As he turned toward what he hoped would be his next kill, the missile alarm sounded. No less than forty enemy fighters suddenly appeared on his sensors. His mind thrashed, determining that the only thing that made sense was they had been flying so low to the ground as to evade detection.

“Bandits! Bandits, one o’clock high,” Arendse said from the commlink. “Forty-two bandits confirmed! Christus, abandon pursuit of the bombers, form up into finger four formations and engage the enemy.”

Amir pulled up hard on his flight stick, fighting for altitude and vectoring himself toward Arendse’s fighter to

provide her cover; two more friendly craft slid into position, and they roared off toward the enemy. Numerous enemy missile launches occurred, and Amir's HUD went into overdrive, showing the plots. As before, they were almost all spoofed by the powerful ECM carried by the Phantoms, but the pilots they faced had to know that already.

"They're heading straight into air combat maneuvering with us, Colonel," Arendse said through the commlink on the private channel she kept open between the two of them.

"In other words, a dogfight, Sister," Amir commented softly to himself. There was always a new buzzword or phrase, but pilots preferred the words from many hundreds of years ago. "If we only had missiles left, we could destroy them at decent ranges. Unfortunately, we need to engage them on their terms. If we don't, they'll be able to destroy our ground forces with impunity. I don't care how bad their technology is, troops are sitting ducks against air assets. It's been that way since the beginning of air combat."

"We'll take them, Colonel."

"Good hunting, Sister," Amir said, focusing on the incoming enemy, which now split into formations of three fighters each. Steeling himself, his finger stayed on the firing trigger for the neutron cannons as they made the first pass through the Monrovian formation. The speed at which the fighters were closing was so high that it made visual targeting nearly impossible. Amir opened fired as he ripped through the air in the hopes he'd hit something. The rest of the sisters did the same thing, and miraculously, they came out of it unscathed, with several hard kills to their credit.

Arendse's fighter rolled to the right, tracking a group of three Monrovian craft, and Amir stayed close behind her. He found himself impressed by her natural flying ability; even with limited hours in the Phantom, she was dogfighting like an expert. While she lined up her shot, Amir lined up his,

sliding in behind an enemy craft despite its best efforts to throw him off. “Christus two, guns, guns, guns!” Amir called while pulling down the firing trigger. His reward was with another kill.

“Christus one, splash one bandit!” Arendse said as she downed the fighter she was engaging.

The dogfight had degenerated into a tail chase that pilots referred to as a “furball.” Typically, not something CDF pilots had to deal with, as in space most kills occurred as a result of missile hits. This was a challenging battle space for Amir to navigate, especially in the atmosphere where he couldn’t flip his craft around using relative speed and fire on pursuers. Three Monrovians settled into his six, and as Amir was the fighter to the extreme left of the formation, he had no wingman. As his early warning system detected energy weapon fire, he began a series of maneuvers called “the scissors.” Slowing his speed by climbing, he caused the three enemies to overshoot him, and they immediately started a dive, gathering airspeed.

Lining up the shot as the nearest fighter crossed into his forward cone, Amir quickly obtained a hard lock and fired his neutron cannons. Blue fire lashed out from his fighter and reduced another enemy to debris. Thanks to a poor angle taken by the attackers, Amir was able to slide to his right and engage the second fighter, in the same manner, quickly destroying it as well.

The third, though, was made from slightly sterner stuff. Its pilot whipped around in a counter scissors move, and Amir matched him turn for turn. The superiority of the Phantom in thrust-to-weight ratio coupled with its advanced G-force protection for the pilot allowed him to perform incredibly tight turns that would cause a pilot to black out in a less capable craft.

It took five interlocking scissors maneuvers, but he finally lined up the opposing fighter and held the trigger down, sending blue bolts of neutron cannon fire into the fuselage of the Monrovian fighter, which exploded in midair.

Straightening out after the tight-turning fight, Amir realized a split second too late that he had lost situational awareness when incoming fire from a fourth enemy fighter impacted his right wing. The master alarm sounded, and his controls became sluggish. As the enemy craft lined up for the kill, it suddenly exploded.

"Watch your six out here, Colonel," Arendse said as she flew above the debris cloud. "Not bad shooting, though."

A sigh left Amir as he contemplated that just a few seconds before, he was inevitably going to die. "*Allu Akbar*, Sister!"

"That he is, Colonel. Can you still fly?"

"It will take a few minutes for the auto-repair systems of the Phantom to repair my avionics, but yes, I'm still flight and combat capable."

"Form on me, then. The rest of the bandits appear to be disengaging; we're going to provide combat air patrol while our ground forces finish mop-up operations."

"Roger that, Sister," Amir said, gently nudging his fighter along and not overtaxing the damaged wing. Taking a moment to review the common tactical picture in his HUD, he noted with satisfaction that they had downed three-quarters of the enemy fighters. He hoped that David and Cavin were having similar success far below them on the ground.

DAVID SURVEYED the mostly smoking ruins of the concentration camp they had just liberated. Fires still burned

in several buildings, and a sea of former prisoners were lined up in the main yard being attended to by nuns with medical training. Calvin walked up to him, the visor on his helmet flipped up. "Colonel, you okay?"

David nodded, making eye contact. "Yes, a bit rattled, but okay."

"You fleet guys don't get down to the ground enough," Calvin observed.

"Something like that."

"There's something you need to see," Calvin said gruffly.

"Lead the way."

With Calvin out in front, the two of them made their way across the camp, walking through destroyed buildings. Propaganda posters were hung everywhere, promising a better life if the inhabitants accepted science and reason. "These guys lay it on thick, don't they?" David said as he climbed over some rubble.

"Heh, yeah. That's one way of putting it."

It took fifteen minutes to reach their destination: a field outside of the camp that held a giant burn pit. Just beyond that area, David could see earth-moving equipment lined up. As he made his way around the bulldozers and backhoes, he discovered a large trench dug in the firm red clay. The stench hit him first, causing nausea and retching inside of him that threatened to make him vomit on the spot. As he peered down into the trench, the cause of the smell was clear; hundreds of bodies littered the ground where they had been tossed... women, children, men, young and old. All shapes, sizes, and colors were represented.

David stood speechless, tears running down his face at the sight.

"Yeah... me too, Colonel," Calvin said. "I couldn't believe it at first. I've seen so many things, but this is worse than even the League gulags I've been a part of liberating."

David's mind was full of anger. *Someone has to pay.* "Where's the commanding officer of this camp?"

"The sisters have the prisoners rounded up in one of the bunkhouses."

"Show me."

Nothing else was said as the two men trudged once again across the camp. David was lost in a private thought process that shifted from sheer rage to despair that he hadn't known sooner, blaming himself for not being able to help. Arriving at one of the intact bunkhouses, he noticed it had several armed guards stationed at both entrances.

Calvin opened the door.

David walked in first. "Who is the commanding officer of this camp?" he shouted to the room at large.

Every Monrovian soldier in the building stopped what they were doing and looked toward him. A thin, pale man stepped forward, wearing the uniform of the Monrovian National Guard. "I am."

David's face was blood red as he stared at the camp commander. "There are thousands of innocent people dead in a ditch outside of this camp. How could you possibly justify doing that to unarmed civilians!"

"I was… following orders."

"Just following orders…that phrase has been used to explain some of the worst atrocities ever committed by human beings! You wear the uniforms of soldiers, but the soldiers I know don't murder innocents!" David shouted at the top of his lungs.

"It was voted on. It was the rule of the people. Who are we to say otherwise?"

"You say otherwise because it's wrong! You call yourself a soldier; you make me sick. Real soldiers defend the weak, protect the innocent; they give their lives so that others might live!" David completely lost control and pulled his

sidearm from its place in the holster on his right leg. Pressing it up against the forehead of the commander, he continued. “Give me one reason…one single, solitary reason why I shouldn’t kill you right now!”

“We would’ve all been killed if we didn’t obey. Anyone who resisted was put in prison along with their families!”

“So you had to protect your hides by massacring civilians? You make me sick. I’d gladly take a bullet than become you!”

Calvin reached forward and grabbed David’s arm. “You don’t want to do this, sir. You’re not thinking straight. Come on, put that gun down. This piece of trash will get his.”

David glanced at Calvin for a moment. “When? From whom? When we pull out, you really think there’ll be any accounting for what they’ve done?”

“God will judge him, Colonel Cohen,” Kaufman said, loud and clear in a harsh tone. “Not you or I. Put that gun down before I’m forced to stun you.”

“He shouldn’t be allowed to live after what he’s done. None of them should.”

“That isn’t up to us to decide.”

“Then who is it up to, Sister? God? Last time I checked, God doesn’t appear in a pillar of fire anymore. We’re the methods of implementing His laws.”

“Judge not that you may not be judged. However, you judge another, so shall you be judged,” Kaufman responded.

“That particular phrase isn’t in the Torah, Sister,” David spat back.

Kaufman appeared at David’s side and put her hand on his arm. “How about this… if you can stand here and tell me honestly that you’ve never harmed an innocent, that through inaction, or a mistake, or how did we use to refer to it, oh yes… the fog of war, never taken an action that led to the

death of innocent lives, pull the trigger now with my blessing."

David glanced at her and closed his eyes for a moment, considering what she said. *God only knows how many innocents I've killed, directly or indirectly in the last eighteen years. Kaufman's right; it's not my place to take his life and shooting an unarmed man—no matter what he's done—is murder*. He allowed his hand to drop, and Calvin quickly took the sidearm. "I'm sorry," he said, stumbling backward. "They can't get away with it. There's tens of thousands of people buried out there. They have to pay." Tears rolled down his face.

"They'll pay, Colonel," Kaufman said with conviction. "Either in this life or afterward when God will judge them. Colonel Demood?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Please escort Colonel Cohen back to the shuttles. We won't speak of this again."

Calvin nodded and nudged David gently toward the door.

As David was walking out, Calvin turned around. "Listen up. Colonel Cohen's not the kind of guy that can shoot a disarmed man in cold blood. Me, on the other hand, I'm a different type of guy. Any of you step out of line, try to resist, escape, or evade, and I promise you I'll put you down like the rabid dogs you are. And I won't lose a minute of sleep over it. Have a real nice day now." He turned around and left, leaving Kaufman staring with her mouth open.

19

HOURS LATER, after the sisters had finished evacuating the liberated camp, Sarno walked into her command tent. Sister Kaufman and some of the other nuns were present, along with General Monahan, David, Calvin, and Tural. The same paper map remained; Sarno preferred simple solutions over advanced technology whenever possible. *They merely broke down less often. Fixing a fancy tactical display takes money we don't have. If the map tears, I can print another*, she thought.

"Sisters, gentlemen… thank you for coming. I know we're all weary after today."

Her statement was met by silence as everyone stared at her. "I felt this situation would be challenging when we took on the mission. I expected there to be losses, and I expected to find things that would cause the soul to wrench itself. What you found today is horrifying, and it's horrifying that as enlightened as we humans claim to be, such a tragedy could occur. It is yet another example that without God, we have no such enlightenment."

"Once you reduce someone to a sub-human level, it's not wrong anymore," Monahan added. "The Monrovian government is run by a butcher. It's time we take it out."

"The order is not here to affect regime change, General," Sarno replied. *How do I get him to accept we're not going to take out the government*?

"What's the point of our involvement here, then?"

"The point is to evacuate all who wish to leave, General. You may assist with that or not."

"If the objective is to save those who are being exterminated, the best way to do that is to attack the government directly," Monahan insisted.

"General," David cut in. "I think we all get your position. Heck, if I were running this op, I'd probably level Fitzroy's house and call it a night. But I'm not, and neither are you. We agreed to play by Mother Superior's rules."

"Thank you, Colonel Cohen," Sarno said. *This youngster can learn... good*. "We need to focus on the next camp. Sister Kaufman?"

Kaufman stepped forward and pointed to another camp outlined on the paper map. "This is the largest camp the Monrovians are running. It's..."

"Not the Monrovians," Monahan said, interrupting Kaufman. "Our corrupt government. Not all of us. Big difference."

"Of course, General Monahan. This particular camp has at least five thousand detainees in it. While the Monrovian air force can't compete on a plane-for-plane basis... they proved today they can put up some big numbers. My biggest concern is interdicting their air threat going forward."

"Ideas?" Sarno asked the room at large.

Monahan cleared his throat. "I've got one."

"As long as it doesn't involve regime change, we're all ears, General," Sarno said archly.

"How about we hit a high-value target that's in the middle of a major city? I know the National Guard's rules of engagement. They won't attempt air engagements over an

urban center for fear of killing their civilians and undermining support for the war."

David looked at Monahan as if he'd finally spoken something worth saying.

Sarno's eyebrows shot up. *That is quite an intriguing suggestion.* "I take it you have such a target in mind?"

"That I do." Monahan flashed a smug smile. "There's a detention center I'm aware of situated inside of a federal police administrative building. Two days ago, it held the highest-level dissidents on the continent. If we succeed in busting them out, we send a direct message to the government that we can attack them anywhere, anytime, and succeed. We buoy the hope of our citizens and hopefully drive others to fight back. That will make our fight much easier."

David nodded. "I see merit in this, Mother Superior."

"As do I," Kaufman said. "Do you have any information as to the opposing force, General?"

"A few dozen guards, nothing we can't handle. The bigger problem is that they have a rapid reaction force that includes a paramilitary SWAT team on standby. Once they're aware of us... five minutes till those guys arrive."

"We'd have to use stealth as much as possible," David mused. "Hassan, think you could pull ECM pods off the fighters and outfit them to a few shuttles? We'd need to make like holes in the sky."

"Absolutely, Colonel," Amir said. "It'd be quite an effective tactic."

Sarno put her hands on the map, seemingly lost in thought, before glancing up. "Sister Kaufman, handpick three platoons for the assault. Our best sisters, and every advanced weapon we have at our disposal. Have another three on standby for a QRF." QRF was the acronym for "quick reaction force."

“Yes, Mother Superior.”

David raised his hand and Sarno gestured in his direction. “Yes, Colonel?”

“Permission to join the op?”

“I’m in too,” Calvin boomed from his spot in the back.

“Sister Kaufman?” Sarno asked.

“I’d be happy to have both of our CDF friends join us, as long as they remember the rules of engagement.”

“Then it’s settled. We attack tomorrow at 0700 hours local time. Any questions?” No one raised their hands or spoke. “Good. You’re all dismissed.”

Sarno watched as everyone filed out, some like General Monahan with a renewed sense of vigor; some weary and in need of rest. David stayed behind and waited patiently for all to leave. Once the tent’s flap closed for the last time, leaving them alone, Sarno spoke. “What’s on your mind, child?”

“I didn’t want to say this in front of General Monahan for fear of emboldening him further... but he’s got a point. Monrovia’s government is evil. They ought to be held accountable.”

“And you want to be the one to do that?”

“Someone has to,” David insisted. “Why not us?”

“Do you see any judges in my order? Lawyers?”

“I can’t say that I do, ma’am.”

“Then how could we possibly dish out justice? Even if we did, where would we put them?”

David set his jaw. “I seem to remember that the punishment for aggravated murder is death.”

“Ah, so now you just want to establish their guilt and shoot them?”

“Why not?”

“Is that much different from what they’re doing? Rounding people up without criminal proceedings, throwing them into prisons or killing them?”

David's face turned blood red. "They deserve what they get. Killing them would be justice."

Sarno walked closer to David and faced him directly. "Careful. One person deciding who lives and who dies… who does that sound like, David?"

David glanced away, tears forming in his eyes. "The League."

"Yes. It's not our place as individuals to play God. In time, the government of this world will be brought to account. I'm certain of that. Throughout my life, I have believed that what is good, what is just, what is right eventually wins out in the end. This situation is no different. But I must caution you when we lose the battle within, when we surrender to hate and anger… that is when the enemy has truly won. Guard yourself, Colonel Cohen. Don't fall into that trap."

"Yes, Mother Superior."

"If you would excuse me, it's time for me to pray."

"Of course, ma'am," David said, a tight expression on his face as he inclined his head slightly and walked out of the tent. Sarno stood there mutely for some time, pondering the events of the last twenty-four hours. *How easy it is to give in to the impulse to hate, to judge, and to exact revenge. We must continuously secure our hearts against going down that dark road. Otherwise, we'll become just like them.*

DAVID WANDERED AROUND AIMLESSLY after the evening briefing, happy with the fact that they were all making a difference. *But we were too late to save many of them*. He ended up sitting on a step and staring at the sunset, a pure joy after a horrific day.

"Mind if I join you?"

David whipped his head around, startled. Angie stood on the step above him. “I suppose not,” he replied.

Angie sat down on the step next to him. “I always marvel at how sunsets look different depending on the planet you’re on. They’re especially pretty in a binary star system. I’ve only seen one of those, though.”

“Are we on the record or off?”

“Off, unless there’s something you’d like to say?”

David shook his head. “I don’t have anything fit to print.”

“I’m still in shock, to be honest,” Angie said.

“Why?” David asked, peering at her.

“I’ve seen some pretty horrible things out here. The aftermath of battles, dead soldiers, dead civilians. Collapsed buildings and dozens of rescue workers trying to save those that were trapped. That hole with the bodies… it’s the most horrible and gut-wrenching thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“You know what’s worse?” David asked before answering his question. “That the people who did it are going to get away with it. We can’t try them for their crimes, and the government of this planet probably celebrates them as heroes!”

“I don’t understand how another human being could do this. I guess I can get the idea some people are broken and have mental issues, but we’re talking about the majority of people on a planet going along with this and being okay with it.”

“Look back to Earth’s history. Throughout it, people have sprung up who convinced others of some group being sub-human, and then blamed all of society’s problems on them. That happened to my people in the Holocaust. Six million Jews were killed in camps, not unlike the one we hit today. Why? Because they were Jews and some two-bit corporal in the German army got into power by whipping up the masses to believe that the people who were their neighbors, friends,

and family were less than human. All they had to do to make Germany rise again was get rid of the Jews. That war cost a hundred million lives, all told."

"Yeah, but that was five hundred years ago. We've grown; we're enlightened now."

David laughed out loud. "Seriously? Have you not noticed the war we're in against the League? They do the same thing back on their planets. Oh, they're probably better at forcing compliance through brainwashing, but they'll still put a bullet in your head if you don't comply."

Angie glanced down. "But we're not the League. This planet is made up of people that escaped the League in the second wave of the Exodus."

"Any human is capable of horrible things."

"Including you?"

"Including you, me, and everyone else."

"Then why didn't you kill the guy responsible for running the camp?" David looked at her sharply as she continued. "One of the nuns mentioned it. She said you had to be talked down from executing him."

"I didn't do it because it would be murder. Mitzvot four hundred eighty-two...do not commit murder."

Angie's face clouded over. "I don't want to sound insensitive, David, but you kill people on a regular basis. It goes with the job."

"You don't think I know that?" David snapped. "There's a difference between a justified killing in war and murder. The Torah is clear; if you kill someone in combat, especially in a defensive war, it's not murder. Killing a surrendered combatant, no matter what his crimes, no matter what he's done... that's murder. It's a line I can't cross even if for a few minutes I wanted to."

"Doesn't it bother you that you almost did?"

“Sure. Does it bother me that I give an order to fire on a League ship, we get lucky and hit its warhead magazine, and the thing blows up without a single lifepod launch? Does it bother me that I have personally killed dozens of people on the ground, in space, with a weapon, and with the weapons of my ship? You’re damn right; it bothers me. Is that your big story from Monrovia, a decorated CDF officer threatens to kill a prisoner?” David spat at her, losing control of his emotions yet again.

Angie opened her mouth, then closed it, shocked. After a moment, she responded, “No. I wasn’t planning to lead with that. I’m not even planning to report it.”

“Oh really?” David asked sarcastically.

“David, I get it. When I saw that grave, I would have killed every last person that worked in that camp, that enabled it, that did it if I had the power. None of them dared to say no. But you know what really scares me? I’m not sure if I would have said no. I don’t know if I would have had the gumption to stand up for what I knew was right and take the consequences.” A tear slid down her face as she finished.

“I’m sorry,” David replied, chastised. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s okay. We’re all under a lot of stress. I envy you at times for the support system you’ve got built-in with your faith.”

David tried to lighten the mood. “You’re welcome to join me for evening prayers.”

“I think I’ll pass, thanks.” Angie’s face creased with a small smile.

“I understand. Look, we’re doing good here. I believe that with all my heart. Mother Superior and her order…they’re the real deal. They will save a lot of lives that would have been lost. That’s worth it, even if the perpetrators of these crimes aren’t brought to justice now.”

Angie stood and stretched. “I hope you’re right. Because it feels like we ought to be doing more.”

“We can always stand to do more.”

“See you later, David.”

“Take care of yourself.”

Angie smiled as she turned and walked off into the maze of buildings in the base, leaving David to ponder his actions, inactions, and what lay ahead.

A FEW HOURS LATER, almost everyone else was asleep except the nighttime sentries, the few medical personnel watching over the most seriously wounded, and the stragglers that couldn’t sleep. David had walked around and looked in on the nuns doing various tasks, from refilling magazines of their battle rifles, to the nightly mass they celebrated to ask for God’s blessing and to repent their sins. Ending up back at his quarters, which the sisters had graciously provided him with a full room to himself in what had been the bachelors' officers’ quarters on the base, he sat down on the bed. He then fished his tablet out of the space bag at the end of the bed and unlocked it using a combination of his fingerprint and retinal scan.

This lack of intelligence was going to keep biting them in the rear, just like Mother Superior said. It was a small miracle from on high that they didn’t lose half their air cover today. *Let’s see if I can call in a favor and even up those odds just a hair*. He punched up the fleet vidlink, engaging a secure connection and typing in “Robert Sinclair.” As he’d hoped, it showed Sinclair as active.

David pressed the button to connect.

He kicked off his shoes as he waited for the connection to establish and was rewarded a short time later with the

smiling face of Colonel Sinclair.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the man on extended leave himself.”

“Is that fleet-wide news?”

“Colonel… I’m in intelligence.”

“I always thought CDF Intelligence was an oxymoron,” David said with a smirk.

“Hah. We’ve got brilliant computers.”

David snickered in response. “Superior information… superior results. I seem to recall reading that somewhere.”

“Sounds about right. How’s it going on Monrovia? I saw a news report about mass graves.”

“Pretty bad. We liberated a camp today, but we were too late to save them all. Based on ground-penetrating scans of the area, they're at least fifteen thousand people buried at that camp. Maybe more.”

Sinclair pursed his lips together. “Damn. You know if we ever get to League space and investigate the resocialization camps there, it’s probably a lot worse.”

“That thought crossed my mind. But I came face to face with the reality of what mass murder looks like today. It’s not pretty.”

“I’m guessing you have an ask since comm credits are pretty steep, and you’re using those nuns’ dime from the looks of the call request I got.”

“Well… the sisters have great training, pretty decent equipment, and no lack of good leadership and *esprit de corps*. They lack in broad-spectrum intel gathering ability. There’s little in the way of common operating picture, and we got caught with our pants down today. Monrovians sortied in bombers, then tried to mousetrap our small fighter wing. They didn’t succeed, but some of the planes were damaged, and the pilots are rattled. We need some stealth drones that can be interfaced into the battle operations manager they’re

using. Almost all their gear is CDF, so I figure that won't be too difficult."

"Is this a joke?" Sinclair asked, his mouth agape.

"No. No joke, Colonel."

"Cohen… I want to help you, mate," Sinclair said in his baritone English accent. "But you're asking me to commit an offense that could easily end in a court-martial for me."

"I already committed one by going AWOL," David said, invoking the acronym for absent without leave. "I get it's a huge ask. But put all the blame on me… say I ordered you to put a couple of drones around the planet for intelligence-gathering purposes. You haven't received official notification I'm on leave, have you?"

"Well, no. But it's well known inside the intel community on the *Oxford*."

Sensing Sinclair's continued hesitation, David pressed on. "Look, those drones will help us even up the odds. We'll know when hostile air is inbound and be able to vector our guys into the right place to make a difference. Operations tempo is stepping up, and I want to limit casualties among friendly forces to as little as humanly possible."

"I suppose I could say that you redirected the drones after they got on station with your command codes if it ever came down to it."

David smiled. "Do remember our embedded reporter is going to make it very difficult to say anything bad about this op. If nothing else, public opinion will be squarely in our favor."

"JAG could care less about public opinion, Colonel," Sinclair said, his voice tight. "I'll help you, but not because of anything except this… I'm sure it's the right thing to do. I'd rather do what I know is right than live with knowing I could've made a difference for the rest of my life."

“Thank you, Sinclair,” David inwardly breathed a sigh of relief.

“You give those bastards hell, you hear me, Cohen?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. These guys don’t have a chance. They’ve got seventy-five hundred nuns coming for them.”

Sinclair laughed out loud. “I wish I could be there to see that. I’ll burst transmit the drone’s location and control frequency along with standard authorization instructions. Godspeed.”

“We’ll make it count. Godspeed, Colonel. Cohen out.”

David set the tablet aside as the screen blinked out. *God, please let it be enough. Please help us all*. Stripping off his shirt, he was determined to sleep as well as he could to get up refreshed and attack another day.

20

David rose a few hours after he had gone to bed, waking up as the sun came up. His internal clock was messed up, being set to CMT, which was the timekeeping system on all CDF ships. Adjusting to a planet's time was always tricky, especially after so much of his life was spent on starships. He worked through his morning ritual, did a three-mile jog around the base, had a quick breakfast of prepared rations that were kosher, and took a short, two-minute space shower, even though he was firmly on the ground.

After pausing to conduct his morning prayers in private, David reported to the assault shuttle assigned to him for the next phase of their attack plans. As he walked into the back of it, battle rifle slung over his shoulder, Calvin called out to him, "Be still my beating heart! The great Colonel Cohen got here after I did!"

David chuckled, as did most of the nuns. "Colonel Demood, that may be the first time that's ever happened."

"Do you guys need a room?" Kaufman said from the cockpit of the shuttle to sustained laughter from everyone else, including Calvin and David.

"No, ma'am, just some targets to shoot."

Still snickering to himself, David locked his battle rifle into a holder and strapped himself into the last open seat on the shuttle. With his armor, extra magazines, sidearm, and extra gear, it was a tight fit. Glancing to the right at the occupied harness next to him, he took note of a young woman who appeared to be sweating profusely.

"First time?" David asked, flashing a smile.

She glanced at him. "Yes. I've done training insertions many times, but this is my first actual combat drop."

David extended his hand toward her. "Colonel David Cohen, Coalition Defense Force."

"Novice Simone Darzi," she said, taking David's hand and shaking it with a firmness that surprised him.

"Darzi… that's Persian, isn't it?" David asked.

"Yes, it is," Simone replied, forcing a small smile. "My family traces back hundreds of years, all the way back to a country called Iran back on Earth."

"I seem to recall that from school, but that was so long ago." David suddenly felt old. "Not too many Christians hail from Persia."

"There's less than a hundred thousand Catholics in the Kingdom of Persia, mostly on the habitable moon orbiting our primary planet."

"How'd you end up in the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense?" David asked. The varied stories of the nuns had begun to really interest him. Each had a different reason, and all seemed to be entirely personal.

"After I finished my stint in the CDF, I was looking for direction in life." Simone shrugged her shoulders. "I read a story on the holonet about the sisters. I knew as soon as I read it, that's what God wanted me to do with my life. Two years later… here I am. What about you?"

David tried to formulate an answer in his mind as the rear door to the shuttle closed. "During my hitch in the CDF, I

had some trouble with direction too. I thought I wanted to be a rabbi. Instead, I ended up being a soldier. It's apparently what's in my blood. My father was a soldier, his father before him. I'm not doing God's work in the way I had intended, but maybe I'm still doing it some way."

"I have a hard time believing that God's work involves fighting and killing."

"You're not alone in that, Sister. But what can we do? The League's not going away. We fight or we die. Maybe we die even if we fight. I'd still rather go out on my feet."

"All right, listen up!" Kaufman cut in with a loud voice, silencing all chit-chat in the shuttle. "We're eight mikes out from the LZ. We have three other platoons supporting us for a fast-rope insertion to the top of this so-called high-value target area. Our objective is simple; clear the LZ, sweep the building, rescue the people being detained, disrupt Monrovian operations, and get out clean. Use of lethal force is not authorized unless there is no other choice for survival. Are we clear on that, Colonels?" Kaufman's gaze flipped between David and Calvin as she made her last point.

David's voice was loud and clear. "Yes, ma'am!"

"Crystal, ma'am," Calvin said, decidedly less enthusiastically.

"Good. Ladies and gentlemen, watch yourselves down there. We're going into the teeth of the Monrovian special police. Watch each other's backs, remember your training, and God will see us through," Kaufman finished.

David sat back in his harness and closed his eyes, praying silently. *Lord, God of the universe, hear my prayer. If it is Your will, protect the lives of those I go into battle with, and allow them to return safely home to their families, and if it is Your will, please help to rescue the innocent victims of this planet's regime.*

David opened his eyes and glanced around; nearly every nun's head was bowed in prayer, most holding rosary beads.

The final minutes before combat always seemed to stretch into eternity for him; there was a part of him that just wanted to get on with it already. A few minutes later, he got his wish when the shuttle began to slow dramatically.

Kaufman's restraints snapped away from her, and she stood quickly. "Stand by for ramp open!"

Right on cue, the shuttle hovered, and the ramp opened up as their harnesses automatically disengaged. With smooth efficiency that showed professionalism and highly skilled training, the nuns stood, engaged their armor suits to the lines that dropped out of the ceiling of the shuttle, and tossed them out the back. Four at a time, they jumped out of the shuttle, sliding down the ropes onto the roof of the Monrovian government building. Kaufman was one of the first out while David, Calvin, and Simone were in the last group.

David slung his battle rifle over his shoulder and snapped a carbineer into the rope line. Stepping back off the shuttle, he used his gloved hands to control the rate of descent. While the activity wasn't one he regularly did, he'd done it enough to be able to execute without showing fear or freezing up. Unstrapping himself from the shuttle's rope line, he turned forward to see Calvin staring at him.

"Well I'll be; you look like you've done that before, Colonel."

David snickered. "Basic, a couple of times over the years, and right now."

"Sometimes it's better to be lucky than good anyway."

"Amen to that, Cal." David unslung his battle rifle and stepped forward. The rest of the nuns did the same; some set up what looked like a man-portable air defense missile launcher, two more took an overwatch position, one with a sniper rifle, and the other served as a spotter for her.

“Cohen, take Squad B. Your objective is the first floor; prevent reinforcements from gaining entrance. Demood, you’re with me and Squad A,” Kaufman said on the comm link that connected the platoon. “Maintain stealth as long as possible. We’ve been able to loop the video surveillance system, but I don’t know how long it’ll last.”

“Understood, Sister. Squad, on me.” Five nuns, which included Simone, formed behind David. They walked up to the door that led from the roof into the interior of the building, and he fitted a strip of thermite to it. He stepped back and triggered the device. It burned through the door in a matter of seconds, and the sisters with him lifted the door out of the way and quietly set it down on the roof.

David took point, switching on the laser sight on his battle rifle. After two floors, Kaufman’s squad peeled off and he flashed her a thumbs-up. Continuing down the stairwell, they quietly descended to the ground level. Thanking God that most office workers were too lazy to take the stairs, he opened the door to the ground floor, and the rest of the nuns quickly filed through it. Stepping out into the corridor, a trio of civilians greeted them.

They screamed at the sight of David and the rest of the squad, before running away in the opposite direction.

“So much for stealth,” David said dryly into the comm. “Sister Kaufman, be advised we have encountered civilians, and our position is compromised. Going loud!” He stepped forward and motioned for the nuns to form on him. “Press forward. We take the lobby at all costs.”

Not more than twelve steps down the corridor and a security guard appeared. David put a three-round burst of stun rounds into him immediately, and the man collapsed into a heap. Pausing long enough to grab the man’s sidearm, he quickened his steps, and they quickly reached the end of

the corridor; a sign indicated that the building entrance was to the right.

David dropped his battle rifle in its sling and pulled a small handheld periscope for seeing around corners out of his pocket; he peered through the device to see four armed guards milling about, clearly agitated, with another on an active commlink. Stuffing it back into his pocket, he turned around to the nuns.

"Okay, we've got five hostiles. I'm going to toss a concussion grenade in, then we storm the room. Keep your shots tight and watch your flanks. Clear?" David said in a near whisper. Receiving nods in acknowledgment, he pulled a concussion grenade off his belt, pulled the pin, and threw it down the corridor.

Three seconds later, there was a deafening boom and a flash of white light from the lobby. David and the rest of the nuns charged around the corner, firing as they ran. Guards dropped right and left, stunned and twitching on the floor in pain. He finished off the final guard with a three-round burst into his center mass; none of them were even able to draw a weapon. Surveying the lobby, which surprisingly had little battle damage, he nodded in satisfaction. "Very nice work. Now we're in for a treat."

"Treat, sir?" Simone asked.

"Yeah, now we get to hold the front door against whatever the enemy throws at us, which will be every police officer, soldier, and government agent in the city. Take up defensive positions. Overlapping fields of fire. I'll set the claymores."

"Yes, sir!" one of the nuns said, and the rest busied themselves setting up; several had bipods for their weapons and configured them for prone firing positions.

David set down the small backpack he was carrying; inside of it were some nifty explosive devices that the nuns

had designed themselves. The most interesting to him was the modified claymore mines. For six hundred years, human militaries had made use of the claymore; its ability to defend an area from massed infantry attack was exceptional. The nuns, in keeping with their mission not to harm human life, had taken the tried and true area denial weapon and made a non-lethal version. Instead of sending what amounted to a giant shotgun blast of lead balls in a cone out in front of the mine, shredding every target in sight, this claymore instead sent stun rounds flying out. He doubted it would be quite as useful, but as long as the enemy wasn't wearing power armor, it would even the odds.

David arranged the claymores in a zig-zag pattern, twelve of them in all, and linked them to his tablet in two sets of six. *I'll have to time it just right, but if I do, these things will bloody the Monrovians' noses.* Civilians watched him on the street with curiosity, and he could see some of them were placing holocalls and excitedly pointing. *Time to wrap this up.* He picked up the backpack and walked back inside of the building to find that the nuns had dug in about as well as he could have expected. "Sister, let's get the automatic turrets set up."

Simone dropped the pack she was wearing and pulled out two miniature pulse turrets. Again, the sisters' ingenuity was on full display. They had taken standard-issue CDF particle beam auto-turrets and miniaturized them while reducing the power of the particle beam to a level that would leave a third-degree burn on its target but not kill. He understood that they had explicitly coded the targeting AI as to not fire on the human face. With David's assistance, both turrets were set up in short order in spots he hoped were unobtrusive.

"Status?" Kaufman asked over the commlink.

“Buttoned up tight, Sister,” David said. “I’ve got interlocking claymores set. We’re dug in, and ready to receive visitors.”

“Okay, we’ve freed some of the detainees, but there’s a lot more. Resistance is a bit tougher than we expected, but the second and third platoon are assisting us in clearing the building. I need you to hold the line down there, Colonel.”

“We’ll give ‘em all they can handle and then some, Sister. Cohen out.”

David clicked the commlink off as the first wave of police helicars zoomed up to the front of the building. Officers climbed out quickly, all drawing sidearms and aiming down iron sights at the building. He doubted they could see anything, but training was training. “Come out with your hands up! We have this building surrounded!” a deep male voice boomed from a loudspeaker on one of the helicars.

“I think not,” David said to the room at large; several nuns chuckled in return. He looked over at Simone, who had assumed a braced shooting position behind the reception desk. “How are you holding up?”

Simone glanced at him and flashed a nervous smile. “So far, so good, but my heart’s racing.”

“If it’s not, you’re not alive.”

More and more helicars dropped down from the sky, coming to a rest on the street outside of the building; soon there were dozens of police officers facing them down. “I said come out! We will use lethal force and summarily execute anyone who resists!”

David noticed that one of the officers held a hand mic and decided he was the one who was using the loudspeaker to attempt communication. “I’m getting a bit tired of this dude.”

A dark grin crossed his face. *I should open the door and shoot him*. There was something about the non-lethal rounds

that he couldn't quite get over, almost like they weren't real. Those thoughts were immediately cut off when gunfire erupted from the phalanx of cops; the windows shattered instantly, raining glass all over the lobby.

"Open fire!" David shouted, sighting down on an exposed officer and firing a single round; *one shot, one stun, hah. Calvin's got to be loving this.*

The rest of the nuns took targeted shots, and the Monrovian officers dropped like flies. Over the next thirty seconds, anyone outside the building that wasn't in good cover was stunned. Eventually, the gunfire stopped, and an eerie calm settled over the lobby. "Sister Kaufman, this is Cohen. We've repelled the first attempt at an assault. I expect the real opposition to arrive soon. Suggest we wrap this up as fast as we can."

"We're not leaving without the people we came for, Colonel. Hold the line."

"Yes, ma'am," David said, exasperation creeping into his voice. He clicked the commlink off and addressed the rest of his squad. "Okay, Sisters, that was a warm-up. We should see some professionals try their hand at rousting us shortly."

Met with somewhat uneasy silence, David let his weapon drop into its sling for a moment, opened his helmet, and wiped the sweat off his face. Lowering it back into position, he took a swig of water from an in-suit straw and checked the action on his rifle to ensure it was seated correctly and ready to fire. Just as he predicted, the next wave of Monrovians was close at hand. Three vans hovered into view, and he sorely wished that Mother Superior had allowed him to carry rocket launchers; *alas, that wasn't on the list of approved weapons*. Out of each helivan, a team of twelve men in combat armor —thankfully, not power armor— raced out with military precision.

As they ran, they opened up with suppressive fire on the lobby. Bullets flew everywhere, ricocheting off metal surfaces, and David felt more than one round smack his armored suit.

The nuns didn't need an order to fire; they just opened up on anything that moved. Several of the assaulters fell, but unlike the police, these men knew their business. Employing leapfrog tactics, they steadily closed the distance and successfully pinned down most of David's squad. *Seems like a good time for those claymores*. He tapped his tablet and triggered the command to fire the first set. Small explosions dotted across the lawn, and a dozen of the attackers fell, writhing on the ground in pain from the electrical shocks that rendered them unable to move outside of uncontrolled spasms. Still, the remaining members of the enemy team kept coming. David waited another couple of seconds and triggered the next group of claymores; another eight or nine —he wasn't quite sure—collapsed in the grass. The remainder took cover behind the police helicars, and again, an eerie quiet descended.

"Sister Kaufman, now would be a perfect time to get the heck out of here!" David said into his commlink.

"Detainees are secured, Colonel. We're coming down the stairs now, and I've called for evac. Hang tight."

"Yes, ma'am," David replied, fighting down his rushing adrenaline.

After what again seemed like an eternity, David heard the sounds of many feet coming down the corridor behind them. He poked his head around and was greatly relieved to see Kaufman, Calvin, dozens of nuns, and the rescued prisoners. "Status, Colonel Cohen?" Kaufman called out.

"Commando teams repulsed, but they hold the area outside of the building. I wouldn't recommend taking civilians out there until we've cleared the area."

“We’ve got a little surprise for our Monrovian friends,” Kaufman said with a wicked grin.

“Oh?”

“Watch and see. Shuttle one, you are clear to engage.”

Outside of the lobby, David saw the assault shuttle they arrived in vertically hover down into the street. *I can’t believe she’d order its rockets used after the extreme care taken so far to avoid casualties*. Suddenly, he felt pinpricks all over his body. The effect was like being shocked with low voltages of electricity, something that over the years had happened repeatedly, mainly when he was a bosun’s mate back on the *Artemis*. He watched in amazement as the cops, commandos, civilians, and anyone else on the street began to run away from the shuttle as fast as they could, the ones closest to it screaming their heads off. The shuttle moved down the road, sweeping people in front of it and clearing the path. More shuttles then dropped out of the sky and landed on the lawn.

“The sisters mounted our area denial weapons to their shuttles,” Calvin explained. “I’d have just lit the place up myself, but they insisted on doing it this way.”

David caught Kaufman rolling her eyes at Calvin, but in a way that belied amusement rather than annoyance to him. “Now we can leave. Any objections, gentlemen?”

“None here, Sister,” David said while glancing around the destroyed lobby. “Squad, on me. If you don’t object, I’ll take point, Sister Kaufman.”

“No objection, Colonel. Take us out.”

The nuns that made up David’s squad stood up with him and darted after him, taking cover behind the helicars that had dozens of dents in them from stun rounds impacting their sides. There was no enemy movement that David could see. “Clear!” he yelled into his commlink.

David looked back to see a crowd exiting from the lobby, covered by nuns in battle armor. Some of the freed prisoners

were in such bad shape that sisters were carrying them on their backs. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement and swung his head back around. A helivan with the logo of a moving company floated down as he watched, coming to rest in front of a non-descript building two blocks away. *What the heck… oh, snap*! "Down! Down! Everyone down now!" he started shouting into the comm. Nuns flattened themselves into the turf, slinging the civilians down with them.

There was a blinding light, followed by the dull roar of an explosion; its concussive wave knocked David off his feet, and the only thing that saved him from temporary blindness was his helmet's UV filters that snapped to ninety-nine percent visible spectrum reduction automatically.

Half stunned, he opened his eyes and saw almost everyone standing had been knocked down, and a cloud of dust was sweeping down the street toward them. "To the shuttles! Now! Move it!" Kaufman voice sounded over the commlink.

Pausing to pick up a civilian that couldn't walk, David flung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and raced to the nearest shuttle; he returned for another, though the dust made it difficult to see. With the help of his helmet's infrared sensors, he found another fallen civilian and helped the man stand. By the time he got the man to a shuttle and strapped in, he realized that the nuns had finished the job and were loading themselves up.

David took a seat, strapped in his harness, and spent the trip home trying to figure out what just went wrong.

21

INSIDE OF THE command operations tent, Sarno paced. She had been briefed by the strike team leader, Sister Kaufman, during the flight back, and now she was waiting for her senior staff to assemble. Kaufman, David, Amir, and Calvin were the first ones through the flap of the tent. "Greetings, Sister, Colonels."

"Thank you, Mother Superior." Kaufman kneeled and reached her right hand up, the index finger pointing toward heaven; the traditional salute of the Sisters.

David and Calvin brought themselves to attention but did not salute.

"Simply put, what happened?"

"We were able to rescue eighty-nine prisoners. However, we were exfiltrating the area..."

David's face flushed red with anger. "Someone set off a massive improvised explosive device and brought down half a city block."

"It's possible the Monrovians engaged in a false flag exercise to give themselves cover and to sway public opinion against us," Calvin interjected.

"Those people know no bounds of depravity," David said.

General Monahan's face appeared through the tent entrance as he walked in. "I apologize for being late. I was reviewing reports on damage to the government's military infrastructure."

"Thank you for joining us, General," Sarno replied. "We have a bit of a situation here. While thanks to your intelligence, we were able to rescue many high-value prisoners, there was an attack with an explosive-laden hover-van that, in the words of Colonel Cohen, leveled half a city block. I assume the Monrovian government was behind it."

Monahan, for a brief moment, looked squeamish. "Actually, Mother Superior, that was my network."

"What?" David demanded, his jaw dropping open.

Sarno's eyes widened. *What have they done?* "Explain yourself, General."

"The building that we hit was the headquarters of Monrovia's internal security agency. It's quite secret; you won't find it on a map, and most citizens have no idea it's even a government office complex. You cleared the streets for us, and one of my teams moved in. The driver sacrificed himself to ensure the success of the operation, and to prevent the use of remote communication jammers from being effective."

"Let me get this straight," David said, his voice rising. "You gave us intel to enable an attack on a detention facility two blocks from a target you turned around and hit with a suicide bomber? Do you realize how many civilians are probably dead?"

"Oh, stow your sanctimonious bullshit, Colonel. You expect me to believe you've never killed a civilian, that the CDF has never bombed a school or a hospital from orbit. It's called collateral damage. It happens. You've got to break a few eggs to make an omelet."

“Sounds like something a Leaguer would say,” Calvin interjected.

“Gentlemen, please. General Monahan, I’m incredibly distressed that you’ve chosen this course. I’m not sure that we can continue to stay here on Monrovia. I will not be a party to the death of innocents through the actions of my order. It’s an affront to all we cherish and the ideals we try to uphold.”

A nun stuck her head into the tent. “Mother Superior, there’s something on the holonet you should see.” At Sarno’s nod, she stepped inside and tuned the holoprojector. A few moments later, it projected the office of Prime Minster Fitzroy.

“Citizens of Monrovia,” Fitzroy said. “Aggressors from the Terran Coalition have invaded our world; this we already know. They’ve staged a campaign across our planet, killing the brave members of our military and first responders, including our heroic police officers. I know you have seen the images they broadcast from the supposed internment camps, showing starving women and children. This could hardly be further from the truth.”

The holoprojector switched projections, showing the attack on the building earlier in the day. “This is what’s happening out there. Religious terrorists, working with these so-called Little Sisters of Divine Recompense, used a suicide attack to destroy a government building filled with office workers today. Over eight hundred people are dead, hundreds more wounded. This is why we voted to suppress religion; its practice brings nothing but hate, repression, and when those who would force the rest of us to believe like them can’t get their way, they start killing people! We must stand up to these murderers…”

“Turn it off!” David barked; Sarno nodded, and the young nun switched the projector off. “You stupid…freaking idiot,”

David shouted right in Monahan's face, his face red as a beet. "We were winning! Not just the war, but the hearts and minds of the people. Now you've played right into Fitzroy's hands. She doesn't even have to lie or spin it; we just killed hundreds of people with a suicide attack!"

"Again, Colonel, oppressed minorities have used tactics such as this throughout human history. Need I point you back to what happened on Earth before the Exodus?"

"There was a time when people of different religions would kill each other in God's name," Amir interjected. "My people used these tactics on Earth. They are abhorrent and detested by Allah. I for one will not fly another mission with this man running the resistance movement."

We can't just leave the civilians here to their fate. We have to stay, and we have to figure out how to overcome this misstep. Jehovah Jireh… God will provide. "General, you can no longer be involved with our actions if you wish us to stay."

"My people are everywhere; you can't win without us. You need us, Mother Superior."

"Yes, we do need them. But they now take orders from me, or we're pulling out first thing in the morning. The choice is yours… choose wisely."

Monahan made a face. "I will not be blackmailed by the likes of any of you."

"Are you daft?" David said, his voice still loud. "You're out. The only hope this action has for continued success is for you to step to the sideline. Give a public statement taking responsibility and absolving the sisters."

Sarno studied Monahan's face as it turned an even brighter color of red; he resembled a cornered animal. "I want amnesty for myself and anyone involved in the bombing."

Ah, he wants a way out. Good. "We've no courts to try you, General. You and those involved will face no retribution from

us. However, I can make no such promise if the government of Monrovia gets its hands on you. If you stand aside, you will be confined to quarters on this installation until the end of the war." As she spoke, Sarno noticed that David's face contorted and seemed to redden even further, if that was possible. *The young colonel needs to work on controlling his emotions*, she thought.

"I'm not a monster. Simply doing what it takes to win. I'll agree to your terms, but only if you promise not to surrender my fellows and me to the government."

"Mother Superior," David interjected. "Part of this… deal has to be a public statement. I believe the war for the hearts and minds is even more important than the actual armed conflict."

"I concur, Colonel. Well, General Monahan, what do you say?"

"I'll go along," Monahan grated out, clearly upset. "But I don't think we did anything wrong."

"Mother Superior, with your permission, I'd like to go find Ms. Dinman and brief her before this gets out of hand further."

"Granted, Colonel Cohen. The rest of you are dismissed. Sister Kaufman, please place the general under close escort."

"Yes, Mother Superior," Kaufman replied respectfully.

Everyone filed out, leaving Sarno alone in the command tent, staring at a large map of the planet's surface. *We've done much, but there's so much left to do here*, she thought. Deciding to take some time to pray and consult God, she walked out of the tent, her robes swishing behind her.

"Angie?" David called out as he walked into what he and Calvin had nicknamed "the Comm Shack," another tent the

sisters had set up with a wide array of high-tech communications gear. He paid attention to patterns, and Angie's habit was to file a report every afternoon. *Hopefully, this day won't be different, and I get to her before she does*.

"What do you want, Colonel?" Angie said.

David spotted her off to the side behind a terminal. "I wanted to discuss the situation with you."

"Save it. I thought... I really thought that you were an honorable man."

"What are you talking about?" David asked, perplexed at her anger.

"You set up a suicide bombing... I mean, are you stupid or something? You didn't think the Monrovians would figure it out?"

"It wasn't us," David said, his voice tight, anger rising in him at being accused of such a heinous crime.

"Don't take me for a fool, Colonel."

"Angela...listen to me. General Monahan was behind the suicide bombing. Neither I, nor any CDF personnel, nor any of the nuns had advance warning. We were taken by surprise. That's the truth, and I'd swear it on a Torah."

"Then you're an idiot for not realizing he was planning it."

"Look, I never had a great feeling about the general, but I figured we could work with him. Call it the fog of war. That doesn't change that this planet is engaged in horrific behavior, and we've still got a job to do here."

"So the ends justify the means?" Angie asked pointedly.

"Never. General Monahan is currently under armed guard and has resigned as the leader of the Monrovian resistance movement. All members now report directly to Mother Superior Sarno."

Angie looked down at her hands. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

“Since you arrived on my ship, have I lied to you?”

“You’ve refused to answer my questions on numerous occasions.”

David nodded his agreement. “Yes… but I did so directly, and I never lied. I’ve always tried to be honest with you. Even though quite frankly, I didn’t want you on my ship to begin with, I’ve grown to respect your abilities, and that you report the facts without calling balls and strikes.”

“Balls and strikes?” Angie asked with a confused look.

“Uh, it’s a sports metaphor.”

“Well, it’s lame.” Angie was still red-faced, arms crossed in front of her.

“I want to help these people. That’s why I’m here. The op we went on unfortunately enabled this horrific attack, but we didn’t kill a single person. The sisters are so adamant about saving lives that they re-engineered mines to stun people rather than kill or maim them for life. Incredibly inventive technology, I might add. They’d never do anything like what happened with the truck bomb. And if you don’t know by now that the CDF doesn’t do that…”

“No, David, I don’t think the CDF is in the business of suicide bombings. But could I see you guys realizing it was going down and not stopping it? Yeah, I could. Once you decide to take human life, I don’t think it’s that hard to break more moral boundaries.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” David said, confidence filling his voice. “We hold tight to those moral boundaries, as you call them, because we know how tempting it is to bend the rules just a little to get something more done. I’d wager that happened on this planet. Someone decided that if they just had a little more power, they could make a bigger difference. As soon as you start down that road, it’s too late. You always need more power, and the rules always seem to hinder you. Before too long, people are being rounded up

that don't think like you, that you don't like, the ones that are different. They become something less than human, and when they do, killing them isn't a big deal because they're sub-human after all. It's just like putting down an animal. I've spent my career walking the line, refusing to give in to the desire to hate the League and kill as many of them as I could. It's a daily battle that I fight within my spirit, and it's one that I believe only God helps me win."

Angie closed her eyes for a moment and looked back up at David. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made that accusation." She sighed, shaking her head. "All of that doesn't change what happened. I have to file a report, and I'm not going to cover this up."

"I don't want you to."

"Then what would you have me do?"

"Interview General Monahan. He's prepared to take full responsibility for the atrocity. Include that in your report, and also interview the Mother Superior to provide some context to all this."

Angie narrowed her eyes. "Sounds very close to creating a narrative to me, Colonel."

"It's not a narrative; it's the truth."

There was a long silence as she closed her eyes and looked upward. David found himself biting his lip, knowing that their hopes for winning over the people of Monrovia, and in some ways the galaxy, depended on her decision. Finally, she opened them back up and glanced at him. "Okay, Colonel. I'll interview them both and put a story together. But… I will not editorialize. Viewers will have to judge for themselves."

Breathing an inward sigh of relief, David nodded. "Thank you, Ms. Dinman."

"You're welcome."

"I'll let Mother Superior know."

"What's next for you guys?"

David shrugged. “I think we’ll hit more detention centers, free the prisoners, and keep exposing this government for what it is to the rest of the galaxy. Ultimately, how we do that is up to Mother Superior Sarno.”

“You know, of all the guys I’ve worked with, I figured a macho alpha male like you would have trouble taking orders from a woman.”

“I’m simply conforming myself to the chain of command.” *Since when do I come off as overly macho*?

“Uh huh. See you later, Colonel,” Angie replied, looking back down at the terminal she was on.

“Good afternoon, then,” David said, turning to go and wondering what the last interaction was all about.

22

LATER THAT AFTERNOON after David had cleaned his battle rifle and personally inspected his power armor, he wandered through the base. He had no interest in being alone with his thoughts in a cramped room. Walking down side streets, he realized that he was just as lonely and not escaping from anything.

"Hey, Colonel!" Calvin called out, leading David to glance around for a few seconds to determine where it came from.

"Head on a swivel, sir. You need more practice at determining where sounds are coming from."

Locating Calvin, David walked back toward him; Amir appeared to be in tow as well. "What are you guys up to?" he asked.

"Rabbi Kravitz is putting on some big party thing at the God box. He asked us to find you, and I said we'd all attend. Something about the new year."

It's Rosh Hashanah, David realized with a start. *I'm an Orthodox Jew, and I haven't even prepared for the new year.* His heart sank. "Rosh Hashanah."

"Do you mind if we join you?" Amir asked. "After today, I could use some time to worship, and I can't find any other Muslims to do it with."

David grinned at that. “So the Jewish service is the runner up?”

“Well, I was hoping to avoid the sit, stand, kneel thing at the Catholic mass the sisters are celebrating,” Calvin quipped good-naturedly.

“Care to enlighten me as to what the God box is?” David asked.

“Little bit of TCMC humor. Our nickname for the chapel.”

David laughed. “I’ll see you guys at seven PM local, then.” That was traditionally when the service would start.

“Roger that, Colonel,” Calvin said.

David flashed a smile at them and walked off. He spent the next couple of hours trying to make himself feel useful and ended up moving cargo containers with a group of nuns that were stocking shuttles with emergency supplies to assist starving population centers. An hour before the evening service was to begin, he went back to his temporary quarters and bathed. Then he dressed in appropriate civilian clothing that consisted of a pair of black slacks and a white button-down shirt. He took his kippah, also known as a yarmulke, out of its protective case and put it on his head. The small, dome-like, brimless hat fulfilled the requirement held by Orthodox Jews to cover their heads in the sight of God.

The last item that David retrieved from his space bag was his *tallit gadol*, the Hebrew name for a prayer shawl. It was contained with a simple cloth carrying bag that his mother had given him many years before as a gift for his bar mitzvah. Clutching it to his side, he made his way the short distance to the administrative building that the old rabbi had designated a large conference room in as his temporary synagogue.

He marveled at how many Jews crammed into the room that they were using. When Calvin had reminded him of the

Rosh Hashanah celebration for the new year, he had expected to see a handful of people at most. There were dozens of people, however; men, women, and children. The space had a Star of David set up on a table and two lecterns. A young man stood at one. David surmised he was the cantor.

Calvin and Amir walked into the room together, and David waved them over. Both stood to his right side.

Calvin picked up the Hebrew prayer book that had been left on the chair; every chair in the room had the same book. After flipping through it, he looked at David in bewilderment. "This thing is backward."

David couldn't help but roll his eyes. "Jews read from right to left, Cal."

"Oh. That doesn't even make sense. It's natural to read from left to right."

"Only because you've done it that way all your life," Amir said. "It's quite natural to read from right to left if you do that instead from childhood. It's all a matter of perspective."

Kravitz made his way over to the three men and shook each one's hand warmly. "Thank you for coming, Colonels. I hope you enjoy our small service today."

David smiled at the old rabbi. "Thank you for setting this up, Rabbi. To worship together after the trials these people have endured, I know it must be a blessing."

"In truth, I am the one that is blessed by being in the presence of people of such faith. To cling to it in the face of such danger… they show us true dedication to God."

"Yes, they do." *Makes me wonder, how far would I go to keep my faith in the face of persecution like they've endured?*

"I'd better get started. Again, thank you all for coming." Kravitz turned away and made his way up to the second lectern. After the crowd quieted down, he began to speak. "Thank you all for coming today. I recognize that some of us gathered here are Orthodox, some Conservative, some

Reform. I couldn't put together three separate services, so we will proceed as best as we can. That's the thing about us Jews. You can't get rid of us, and while we might not agree with each other about much, we unite together when it counts. Please join me in reciting the Shema."

Kravitz placed his hand over his eyes; this was traditional during the prayer known as the Shema. It was among the most important and well-known of all Jewish prayers. David thought back to his childhood; it had been the first prayer his father taught him. He said it every morning, and every night before he closed his eyes.

David placed his right hand over his eyes, as did everyone else in the room.

"*She-ma Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad*," Kravitz intoned in Hebrew. It meant, "Hear O'Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

"*Baruch shem kavod malchuto l'olam va-ed*," Kravitz continued. This translated to "Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever."

Kravitz then switched to English, David assumed this was because only a few of the Jews present appeared to be Orthodox*. It would be far easier to hide your beliefs if you weren't a practicing Orthodox Jew*. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

A tear rolled down David's cheek as he recited the prayer along with the congregation. There was just something about the prayer, which amounted to a Jew's statement of faith, that moved his soul in a way he couldn't put into words.

Traditional prayers around the new year continued for some time in the service, and David recited right along with the congregation in Hebrew. Since being posted to the *Lion of Judah*, he had the luxury of being able to attend prayers daily given its unique multi-chapel and chaplaincy system. One week, he had even been able to participate in services uninterrupted on the Sabbath. *There's just something about this group of people that is moving. In the middle of being rounded up, persecuted, tortured, and shot for their faith, not only did they keep their ways, they didn't lose hope. Is that something I could've done? Despite the war, those of us in the Terran Coalition are free to believe, free to gather together and worship, and draw inspiration from those around us.*

After the prayers and reading of the Torah concluded—each service followed a liturgical script—Kravitz retook the lectern to deliver his sermon. David had heard the old rabbi preach enough times to know that he was a rabbi that preferred to use his sermon to teach a parable that was relatable to the events going on around them. Remembering his Jewish history, he recalled this type of sermon was called a *maggid*, from the Hebrew word "to relate."

"Today, we gather to celebrate the new year of 6218. We weep for those who are gone; we pray for those who remain. In times like these, I remember the words of Rabbi Tarfon. He enjoined us that we don't necessarily have to finish the great work, but nor are we free to ignore it. Each of us acting alone cannot finish the task that has begun to heal our galaxy and restore creation in the image of Adonai. But each of us has something to add, a piece to complete. Let each man and woman here in this congregation do their utmost as we go forward, regardless of ability. We have a duty to Adonai, we have a duty to one another. We must oppose evil in all its forms. We are all destined to someday fall on our knees in front of Adonai and be examined to the core of our

soul. On that day, we will be judged. *Baruch Atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam*," Kravitz said, his last few words in Hebrew; they translated to "Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe."

"Some of us oppose the evil that sweeps our galaxy through indirect means. By leading a life dedicated to Adonai, we show the light to the rest of the human race as well as our alien brothers and sisters. Through example, we stand before the rest of the nations. There are also those of us that oppose evil directly. The brave soldiers of the Coalition Defense Force, those here who have taken up arms to defend themselves, their families and friends against the evil of this planet's government. To those of you who wield the sword, I charge you not to fear your enemy. Do not fear their numbers or their strength. The Lord, our God, will stand with us today, tomorrow, the week after, and the century beyond. If we keep His commandments, humble ourselves, and pray without ceasing, Adonai *will* answer our prayers."

"We will now say the Kaddish in honor of those lost. Yoram Moshe will lead us," Kravitz said.

A teenaged boy, perhaps fifteen years of age, stepped forward and took the lectern. "Exalted and hallowed be His great Name."

"Amen," David said, along with the rest of the congregation. Calvin and Amir stumbled along.

"Throughout the world which He has created according to His Will. May He establish His kingship, bring forth His redemption and hasten the coming of his Moshiach."

"Amen," David again intoned, along with the rest.

"In your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon, and say, Amen."

“Amen. May His great Name be blessed forever and to all eternity, blessed,” David recited automatically, from many years of practice.

“May His great Name be blessed forever and to all eternity, blessed and praised, glorified, exalted and extolled, honored, adored and lauded be the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He.”

“Amen.”

“Beyond all the blessing, hymns, praises, and consolations that are uttered in the world and say Amen.”

“Amen.”

“May there be abundant peace from heaven, and a good life for us and for all Israel and say Amen.”

“Amen,” David said yet again.

Yoram took three steps back and spoke again while bowing his head to the right, straight ahead, then to the left. “He who makes peace in His heavens, may He make peace for us and for all Israel and say Amen.”

“Amen,” David said. Calvin echoed him loudly.

With that, Yoram walked back to his seat and Kravitz returned to the lectern. “Thank you,” Kravitz said. “I will now release you all; remember that tomorrow, our sunrise service starts bright and early at seven thirty AM. I hope to see as many of you who can come as possible. Shalom!”

David, Calvin, and Amir made their way out of the building and back out into the main square that was adjacent to the building they’d been in. The sun was setting, and its light barely shone. For the first time in several days, David felt refreshed.

“You know, Colonel, I should have just done the Catholic service. Jewish church has more exercise at it than morning PT.” Calvin snickered as he delivered the joke.

David laughed, as did Amir. “You should attend Islamic services then. We must kneel before Allah for a long period.

Perhaps it would be more to your liking."

"I'll pass. Guess I'm just not cut out for being devout."

David put his arms around the shoulders of both Calvin and Amir. "Gentlemen, let's go get some of whatever is passing for food tonight, enjoy each other's company, and get ready for another day."

"Now that's something I can say amen for, provided of course that next day brings dispensing some good old-fashioned butt whoopings to the Monrovians."

"I'm in," Amir said.

At that moment, David knew that he was where he was supposed to be, doing what he needed to do, and aided by those who were not only highly capable individuals but also his friends. *God is good*. They walked off toward the chow hall, and he felt refreshed, all the way down to his toes.

23

THE NEXT MORNING, the *Shadow Wolf* made her approach to Monrovia. James Henry sat in the captain's chair, personally overseeing the landing. Compared to military spaceships, the bridge of the ship wasn't much to look at, but it was functional. More importantly, it was theirs. He glanced over at the tactical station to see Yanik S'srish, his second mate. The big Saurian was absorbed in the readouts on his station, while the helmsman, Cera McGinty, sat in the pilot's seat toward the front of the bridge.

"Lawrence drive readiness, Cera?" Henry asked

"Purrin' and ready to go, Cap," McGinty said; she was a short Irishwoman with dark brown hair that hailed from the neutral world of Connaught.

"Activate Lawrence drive, destination…Monrovia."

"Aye, sir," McGinty answered in her distinctive Irish accent.

Unlike a large warship, the Lawrence drive on a cargo freighter, especially one like the *Shadow Wolf,* which was independently owned, didn't have the benefit of constant upkeep and repair. The ship shuddered as the drive cycled on and struggled to generate the portal between points in the universe that allowed ships to cross vast distances in the

blink of an eye. Finally, it triggered, and a swirling wormhole opened in front of the *Shadow Wolf*, its maw beckoning them in.

Sub-light engines flared, and the cargo ship roared forward into the wormhole. Its transit completed a few seconds later, and Henry patiently waited the few seconds it took before sensors would come back online and tell them where exactly they had ended up.

"Sensors online, Cap," McGinty said. "Monrovia is less than eight hundred kilometers off our port bow. Transit successful!"

That was more than a little bit closer than he'd like to cut it; if the ship had exited the wormhole inside of the planet, it would have catastrophic effects, the least of which would have been their immediate deaths. "Do we have the landing beacon?"

"Yes, sir, beacon locked on," S'srish said. "Roughly one-half orbit from our current location."

"Cera, take us in. Maximum thrust."

"Aye aye, Cap!"

After a few seconds, S'srish turned to look at Henry. "Captain, I'm reading a cluster of five League of Sol Type-D cargo ships. They appear to be making for Monrovia's main port."

Henry raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Scan them. Can you tell what they're carrying?"

"Munitions, space superiority fighters of the latest League types, armored vehicles, weapons."

"So, the League is supplying the Monrovians and assisting them in their quest to kill off the evil believers," a voice called from the back of the bridge. It belonged to Felix Rothbard, another former member of the Coalition Defense Force and an old friend of Henry's.

“It would appear that way,” Henry said. “It’s possible it’s just another run-of-the-mill arms shipment to a third party.”

“Yeah, and I’m the Pope,” Rothbard replied.

“Do you wish to engage, Captain?” S’srish asked.

“We’re in a position to do more than just drop off some cargo here,” Rothbard mused from his position in the rear of the bridge. “Might feel nice for a change.”

Henry snorted with amusement at that. "Because they're not mad enough at us already, huh?"

Felix shrugged. "They already want us dead. We might as well return the favor."

“Yanik, is the Monrovian defense grid operational?” Henry asked.

“Negative, Captain. It appears to be offline, and none of the satellites are activated.”

“The guy who hired us did say that the *Lion of Judah* had disabled their planetary defense capabilities,” Rothbard said.

“Damnit, Felix, we should just drop our cargo and get out of here.”

“You’ve seen the same news reports I have, Jim. If the League succeeds in getting advanced weapons onto Monrovia, it’ll be a blood bath. We can help here,” Rothbard insisted stubbornly.

He's right. I don't want to see that happen either. Henry sighed to himself. *Here I am, supposed to be looking out for my crew and me only, and I'm ready to play the heroic CDF officer once again.* “Yanik,” Henry began. “Are those cargo ships within range of our special package?” He spoke knowing it would be the only weapon he had available with the range needed to hit the enemy.

Yanik checked his instruments. “Affirmative, Captain.”

“Very well. Charge the ventral neutron cannon, open the outer doors.”

“Yes, Captain.”

One of the many upgrades to the *Shadow Wolf* was a large neutron cannon that was mounted spinally between the holds to face the bow. Ordinarily, it was hidden under deck plating to disguise its profile, but with a flip of a switch, the plating shifted away to reveal the barrel of the cannon. With the ship's hidden fusion drives to provide extra power, it offered a deadly first strike weapon and allowed the vessel to punch above its weight class.

“Target the nearest League cargo ship, Yanik.”

“I have a firing solution, Captain.”

“Shoot.”

White-hot blue energy shot out of the neutron cannon, flying across space at the speed of light and impacting against the shields of the unlucky League cargo freighter. In less than a second, those shields failed, and the full force of the beam smacked against the ship’s hull. Searing through the engine housings and punching through the reactor spaces at the rear of the vessel, the hapless freighter exploded in a mass of fire, leaving small debris as the only evidence it ever existed in the first place.

“Enemy ship destroyed, Captain,” S’srish reported calmly.

“Target the next freighter.”

“Firing solution locked into the computer, Captain.”

“Shoot,” Henry said, leaning forward in his chair.

Again, the *Shadow Wolf* fired her primary armament, this time slicing through the exhaust manifolds of the freighter targeted, out the other side and by blind luck hitting a third League ship in the long neck of the vessel that connected the cargo pods together. The force of the beam severed the reinforced superstructure of the freighter, and the aft portion began to spin away, out of control. Meanwhile, the first target lost engine power and started to enter

Monrovia's atmospheric at an angle that would cause it to burn up during reentry.

"Two more targets down, Captain," S'srish reported; Henry was able to view the destruction on his console.

"Nice shooting, Yanik. Target the next ship."

S'srish glanced back at Henry. "I'm sorry, Captain, but the League ships have increased velocity and entered the planet's atmosphere. Our neutron cannon will attenuate in the upper atmosphere and fail to cause sufficient damage unless we close our range substantially."

"We've got the engine power to catch up, Captain," Rothbard interjected. "Let's light off our fusion drives and run them down."

"No," Henry said, firmly making up his mind. "We've got no idea what they have in terms of defenses or what's waiting for us. Cera, full power dive, take us to the landing pad. We're dropping our cargo and getting the hell out of here." *Now the League's probably going to send cruisers after us. Maybe I can wring enough extra credits out of Kenneth to pay for resetting our global IFF transponder.*

"Aye aye, Cap," McGinty responded as the ship pitched down, increasing its forward speed and pushing everyone into their chairs.

DAVID STRODE across the deep black paved surface of the cargo ramp that abutted the flight line on the Monrovian National Guard base they had occupied. Shuttles lined the apron with heavy loaders moving about the area carrying shipping containers full of food, medicine, and munitions that were being unloaded from a boxy, squat spaceship parked on the nearest taxiway.

The name *Shadow Wolf* was etched into the side of the ship, and a gangway went from the bottom of the vessel, connecting the open hold to the ground. As David walked, he saw the hatch at the top of the gangway open, and a tall man of some African ancestry walk out. The man made his way down the gangway, and David called out toward him. “Ahoy there! Is Captain James Henry aboard?” Kenneth had sent him a note detailing the ship and its captain; David wanted to meet the man and shake his hand.

As the man got to the bottom of the gangway, he stared at David. “Well, I was. Now I’m talking to you. And you are?”

“Colonel David Cohen, Coalition Defense Force,” David replied, extending his hand toward Henry.

Henry politely shook the outstretched hand. “Intelligence put you up to this?”

David shook his head. “No... I’m doing this against orders.”

“Seriously?” Henry replied, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. “I find it difficult to believe that the commanding officer of the *Lion of Judah* would do anything not approved in triplicate by brass.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover, Captain. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have much to do with you.”

Henry's expression went solid, emotionless. “You looked at my file?”

“Yeah,” David said while shrugging his shoulders. “Your resignation wasn’t exactly clean. Dishonorable discharge after a guilty plea for dereliction of duty and almost blowing up your ship?”

The solid look remained, but there was no denying an old anger in those brown eyes. "That's what I pled to, yeah," he said in a controlled tone. "Maybe I'd have gotten a better deal if I'd had your connections with the brass."

“I didn’t get my post due to connections. I got it because I was in the right place at the right time and did the right things. Or, the wrong place at the wrong time, depending on your point of view,” David replied, his voice tight and face turning red.

Nothing changed the neutral expression on Henry's face. His eyes did focus more upon David's, as if to read his expression in turn. “What’s your point of view, Colonel?”

“My point of view is that I stopped the League from killing a lot of civilians, avoided a court-martial for taking the only tactical action that could result in victory, and was offered a chance to do something more. I shake in my boots every time I consider the incredible power I have under my command, and I shiver for the thought of what could happen if I make a single poor judgment call. I don’t begin to know what you went through or what’s led you to where you are now, but I assure you, I don’t operate on connections and I despise those who do.”

Henry stood mute for a moment, making David think that he was taking his measure. “I won’t lie to you, Colonel. I don’t get all wild-eyed and happy when I see the CDF coming these days. But you seem all right. I’m glad I could help here. It paid well too,” Henry said as he smirked a bit. “There is something you should know. On our way in, we took down a few League transport ships. Type-Ds.”

Oh, snap. Just what we need…covert or overt, for that matter, League support of the Monrovian government. “Any idea what they had in them?”

“My scans showed weapons, ammunition, planes, and tanks. We got three out of five.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how’d you pull that off flying what appears to be a cargo ship yourself?”

Henry just smiled in return. “Trade secret, Colonel.”

“Need anything from us while you’re here, Captain?”

“We’re good. As soon as the teams from the Little Sisters complete offloading the cargo, we’re out of here.”

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to stay and offer some fire support? A starship providing overwatch would be, well, quite welcome,” David asked.

“No can do, Colonel. I’ve got a schedule to meet and customers to satisfy. I’m sure you understand. This is a job. Besides, I just blew up three of their ships, and you've got your big battlewagon in the area. The League's going to respond at some point.”

David smiled. “If it were just a job, you wouldn’t have blasted those Type-Ds out of space.”

“I’m sure I’ll get a handsome reward for that too,” Henry replied lightly.

“Regardless, thanks for evening up the score a little bit.”

“You’re welcome. If you’ll excuse me, Colonel, I need to go see my second mate and check on what’s taking so long.”

“Of course,” David said, standing aside. Watching Henry’s back as he walked across the ramp, he couldn’t help but wonder what could so upset the apple cart of a man’s conscience that he no longer seemingly had interest in fighting the League except when it generated money. *Perhaps I can get to know Captain Henry better someday. Somehow, I don’t believe he’s a bad guy. Certainly not in the way his personnel record would make it seem.*

From her desk within the Monrovian government complex, Fitzroy considered the events of the last few days. *These damn religious zealots have made a mess out of things. They’ve wiped out millions of credits in military hardware, killed a few dozen pilots, but surprisingly few on the ground. Undoubtedly for propaganda purposes. It didn’t help that the traitor took*

responsibility for the suicide bombing. That line of attack worked well in the instant reaction news ratings. Still, the situation is out of hand. We need some more help. Steeling herself, she pressed the intercom button on the communication link built into her desk. "Sefton, are you there?"

"Yes, Prime Minister," Sefton Garner, her assistant, replied in an eager voice.

"Get me the League's ambassador; tell him it's an emergency."

"Right away, ma'am," Garner said.

The link blinked off. Fitzroy sat quietly, hoping that the League ambassador would take her call. They didn't like screw-ups. Her vidlink window sprang to life with the image of Wen Chong, a striking woman clearly of Asian descent with long black hair.

"Ambassador Chong, thank you for taking the time to speak with me."

"Anytime, Prime Minister. The League of Sol is always there with a hand of friendship to our fellow human brothers and sisters."

"I won't insult your intelligence, Ambassador. We're not doing so well against these religious fanatics that have invaded our planet."

"Let me be equally frank then, Prime Minister. From the League's perspective, you have bungled this operation from the beginning. We provided you with a method for purging your planet of reactionary influences. You chose to try to be gentle… see what it got you? The only way to deal with enemies of the state is through absolute force. Our own experiences have proven that time and again."

Colleen pursed her lips together. "Regardless of that, our government is in real danger of collapse. Our military can't fight on anything like equal terms due to the technology gap. We need reinforcements, and we need access to the latest

League technology. Advisors who could show us how to use it would be useful."

"I hear a lot of needs… but what's in it for the League?" Chong asked with a deliciously wicked smile.

For all the talk about human harmony, they still want their pound of flesh. "We will speed up the integration of our society to join the League within three months. I'm sure a safe port of call this deep within neutral space so close to the Terran Coalition will be useful."

"Now that's an excellent example of human cooperation in the face of adversity, Prime Minister. It just so happens that we anticipated needing to help our friends on Monrovia. The cargo ships of ours that were attacked yesterday contained a lot of technology to help even the gap. Despite losing a few of them, we'll make advanced space superiority fighters, ground attack vehicles, and weapons available to your armed forces. There are also League military advisors to assist in their use. Don't worry; we're preparing another shipment and will be resupplying you as much as you need."

Fitzroy closed her eyes, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Ambassador. Thank you so much. We'll put your tools to great use."

"I'm certain you will, Prime Minister. Failure is not something that is well tolerated by the state."

"We will not fail again, Ambassador. You have my word."

"Good. Then I bid you good day. Our military attaché will be contacting you shortly to arrange for the transfer of hardware."

"Thank you again," Fitzroy said before disengaging the vidlink. *Okay, now we have to deliver*. She leaned back in her chair and took a moment before getting to work.

24

Far away from Monrovia, back on the *Lion of Judah*, Kenneth Lowe was catching up on reports in his office. One of the seeming constants of the universe, there was always another monthly or weekly status report due. Lately, a new government civilian overseeing the group of projects he managed, all centered around technology increment upgrades to the *Lion*'s systems, had been making his life difficult with even more reporting requirements. Noticing a message from her on his tablet, he switched programs and pulled it up.

Mr. Lowe,

I have attached a new daily reporting form for all personnel and projects under your purview. Please ensure that starting tomorrow I receive a daily report no later than 1800 hours CMT.

– Sabrina Backman, CDF Special Projects

"Ugh," Kenneth said out loud, though no one was in the room with him. Shaking his head, he began to type out a message to his leads, instructing them to pass down the directive. *We'll end up wasting an hour a day on this crap, per person, reducing our effectiveness. I ought to talk to Colonel*

Cohen about it. No… better to save that bullet for when it's needed.

A blinking vidlink request interrupted Kenneth's writing; checking the sender, he quickly touched "answer" when he noticed it was from James Henry. A moment later, the cargo captain's smiling face filled the screen of the tablet.

"Kenneth, my friend. How're you doing?"

"Oh, I'm okay. Dealing with the usual CDF paperwork and administrative bull crap. You're in unusually good spirits. Succeeded in dodging the Monrovians?"

"Not entirely. We delivered the supplies and took out three League Type-D cargo transports. Two got through, but that ought to help out your friends."

Kenneth's eye's opened wide. "League forces were there?"

"No combat ships, just the cargo carriers. A covert operation, judging by the lack of escorting warships. They had war material on them… same idea we had. That will, of course, cost you extra."

"Oh, come on," Kenneth said in an exasperated tone. "You guys already made a mint off this."

"And some members of my crew aren't happy we torched League ships. I keep everyone happy by making sure they're well paid. Consider it a tip for a job well done."

"I'll see what I can do, James."

"Good… maybe I can finally get my shields upgraded again since we keep getting shot up. I thought I'd left that life behind," Henry said with a chuckle.

"Any thoughts on another drop?"

"Not happening."

"They may need more supplies."

"Then find someone else, because I just engaged League ships in combat, and I'm going to have to go have my IFF

transponder cleaned. I'm not taking that risk again. I don't work for CDF intelligence."

"Neither do I."

"Yeah, but we're both doing their dirty work right now. Besides, this entire operation's gone sideways with that stupid terrorist attack. There's a reason we don't get involved in other people's wars. They're messy. Very messy."

"Still the right thing to do," Kenneth said; he'd seen the news too and watched it with disgust. *At least General Monahan has publicly accepted responsibility. That's taken the external heat off the Little Sisters. Maybe it's enough for David and the rest of them to prevail.*

"Comm time isn't cheap, Kenneth. I'll see you around the galaxy. *Shadow Wolf* out."

"Take care, James," Kenneth replied as the vidlink cut out. *Well, at least that's done. I hope Colonel Cohen's doing okay out there. And these stupid reports aren't going to do themselves.*

DAVID STARED out and around the parade ground that had been taken over by the nuns. Thousands of them, many in traditional black robes with white habits, others in gleaming white battle armor, stood in neat rows as far as he could see.

Positioned toward the back, David, Calvin, Amir, and Tural had gathered together; they had all been summoned by Mother Superior Sarno before combat operations were to begin for the day.

"I guess we're going to do another big push," Calvin said.

"I wouldn't doubt it. We need to maintain forward momentum. In my discussions with the Mother Superior, I believe she wants to bring this to a tipping point where the Monrovian government collapses," David replied.

“I worry about the casualties,” Tural said. “I’ve seen so many tortured, malnourished people rescued from the camps. I can’t imagine what they’ve been through.”

Amir shook his head. “The butchers that did this need to face the wrath of Allah. As his instrument, I am looking forward to bringing it to them.”

“Yeah, how is it that the fighter jockey is the only one that’s getting to kill the enemy here? I’m reduced to stunning people,” Calvin snorted.

“I’m beginning to think you have a problem,” David said dryly toward Calvin.

“It’s mostly in jest, sir.”

“The ‘mostly’ part is what worries me.”

Tural and Amir snickered. “I think she’s stepping up to the front,” Tural said, redirecting all of them.

David glanced forward, and indeed Sarno had taken the center of the formation; he was consistently impressed with her, that despite her age, she did everything she demanded of those under her command. *She’s probably in better shape than I am, and I’m nearly twenty-five years younger. Hmmm, on second thought, that’s embarrassing. I should work out more.*

“Sisters, and those friends who have joined us, thank you for coming this morning. The last twenty-four hours have been difficult. We’ve been tested in ways that we haven’t been tested in years,” Sarno began. *It’s almost like she speaks directly to you.* “Throughout the history of our order, we have strived to defend the weak, liberate the oppressed, and to honor God throughout our actions. Once the battle is won, we mend the brokenhearted, bind up their wounds, and try to heal their souls. We’ve made much progress in this fight, but the hardest portion of it is yet to come. Our enemy is entrenched, and time is against us. Today, we will attack three camps at the same time, and our air support will be stretched thin. But our God is a strong tower, and in Him we

can trust. Watch out for and protect your sisters to your left and to your right. Trust in your leaders and your training. Together, and through God's grace, we will come home today, and we will emerge victorious over this foe. Let us pray."

David bowed his head while the nuns prayed, mostly in Latin. Instead, he prayed silently in Hebrew. *Lord, God of the Universe, if it is Your will, please protect the lives of those who serve with me this day and return them safely to their families. Amen*. He lifted his head to see the nuns coming to attention as one and saluting with the same index finger pointed to the sky he had observed them since joining the expedition.

"Now, to your assigned shuttles. We move out in thirty minutes," Sarno said. Like a human wave, the nuns melted away.

"I'll head back to the hospital. Allah willing, there will be few casualties today requiring my attention," Tural said.

Kaufman walked up to the four of them. "Gentlemen, glad to see you're all ready to go. Colonel Demood, you're with me. Colonel Cohen, you're on shuttle two."

David flashed a smile. "Thank you, Sister." He turned to leave. A sudden question popped into his mind. "If I may, what does the index finger pointing upwards signify? I assume it's your unique form of a salute."

"You assume correctly, Colonel," Kaufman replied, all business as usual. "As for the salute, yes, it's unique. It signifies that we worship and respect God, not each other. Then again, this order is pretty unique, wouldn't you say?"

"Most unique military outfit I've ever seen; can't even kill the enemy," Calvin said.

"Do you want me to PT you around this field, Colonel Demood?"

Before Calvin could respond, David jumped in, a big grin on his face. "Get to your shuttle before the lady makes you

do push-ups, Cal."

Calvin tried to look pissed, but David wasn't buying it. "Yes, sir."

"I'll see you all later," David said, finally turning and walking off toward the shuttle landing area.

Sticking out like a sore thumb in the sea of nuns, he made his way off to the shuttle he'd been assigned to; hurrying up the ramp, he realized there was no one who he recognized onboard. "Is this shuttle two?" David asked, wanting to be sure he was on the right craft. It did have a large "2" on the side of it, after all.

One of the nuns looked up. "Yes, it is, brother," she replied before looking back down at her rosary beads.

David sat down in one of several empty seats, locking in his harness like it was second nature after securing his battle rifle in its holder. There was no interaction or discussion between those in the shuttle; he had noticed on repeated sorties now that the nuns almost exclusively prayed the rosary on their way to and from combat. To his surprise, Simone, the novice that had joined his squad on the last combat mission, walked in.

"Colonel Cohen!" she said brightly. "We meet again."

David smiled. "That we do. Assigned to shuttle two as well?"

Simone secured her battle rifle and strapped into the harness next to David. "That I am."

"Another day, another concentration camp, eh?"

Simone raised an eyebrow. "That's some pretty gallows humor there."

"Hang out around Colonel Demood long enough, and it becomes infectious."

"Sounds like you've served with him for a while."

David smiled. "Only a few months. But he's a good Marine, and I feel like I've known him far longer."

“Commanding the *Lion of Judah* must be an incredible task.”

“It’s a rather humbling and sobering position. One of the most powerful warships in this part of the galaxy, and the act of getting it right, every single time, falls on me. No pressure, right?”

“Do you wish you didn’t have the job?”

David shook his head. “Never. God puts us where we need to be. Ergo, I’m where I need to be.”

The ramp on the shuttle began to close, and Simone pulled out her own set of rosary beads. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to pray before we drop into combat. It’s something we all do.”

“I do the same, Sister. I might do a little differently from you, but it’s the same idea.”

Simone smiled and closed her eyes, looking down. David glanced around the shuttle and focused his mind on his thoughts. How was the *Lion* doing? He didn’t doubt that Aibek could ably command her, but knowing that his crew was hundreds of lightyears away, fighting the League, didn’t sit well. *Still, this is the right thing to be doing. We’re making a difference here.*

25

Fifteen minutes into the flight was the first visible sign that something was wrong; the shuttle began to yaw back and forth, taking evasive maneuvers. The nuns looked up from their prayers and glanced at each other nervously. David cued his comm channel to reach the cockpit. "We're getting shook up good back here, flight. What's going on?"

"We're under attack, Colonel Cohen. Please stay off this channel!" came a curt reply from the pilot of the craft he was on.

David glanced over to Simone, who much like the last time they had deployed, looked quite apprehensive. "First time being shot at in a shuttle?"

"Yeah... what about you?"

David thought back to his many years of experience in the CDF; being under enemy fire was something that had become second nature. "After nearly twenty years in the military, it's old hat. Though I hate being in the back, unable to affect the battle."

"Why?"

"Because if I were at the controls, at least I'd be able to affect the outcome in some way. Back here... I'm just a

passenger. No matter what happens, I have no control over it."

"That's an interesting way of looking at it," Simone said as the shuttle slammed to one side in a sharp turn. The harnesses shook, and everyone got tossed around a bit. "If we can't control the outcome, just give it to God and quit worrying!"

An equipment bag broke free of its holder and slammed back into the bulkhead. "Yeah, that's not working for me, Sister."

Simone laughed nervously; David closed his eyes and tried to push away the fear which had invaded him. There was an explosion close by that severely rattled the shuttle and caused it for a moment to completely invert.

The pilot was able to right its flight path quickly, but David could tell from the sound of the engines that something was seriously wrong. "Oh, snap!"

"Brace! Brace! Brace! We're going down!" the pilot stated calmly but forcefully through the intercom. Everyone in the shuttle quickly assumed a brace position, heads down. David found himself hoping that the reinforced harnesses would be enough to keep them from suffering too much injury.

"I'm scared," Simone said. "I know I shouldn't be, but I can't help it."

"Nothing wrong with being scared, Sister," David managed to get out as G-forces began to impact them in the steep dive. Talking, even breathing became difficult, as his chest felt like an elephant was sitting on it. "If you're not, there's probably something wrong with you."

Thinking he would end up regretting it, David pulled up the flight readouts on his helmet's HUD. They confirmed his worst fear; the shuttle had lost thrust and was plummeting out of the sky. He watched the horizon level out as the pilot expertly tried to save the shuttle; in the end, she was able to

achieve straight line flight but couldn't reduce forward speed. As they were over an urban area, they were headed straight for a building. With no thrust or control, there was nothing else the pilot could do. David reached over and held Simone's hand. "This is going to hurt." He forced as much bravado into his voice as he could.

David's brain registered the impact into the building's face; the world around him spun and warped as the shuttle absorbed the damage. Its hull cracked open, flinging nuns in their drop harnesses out of the cargo area; a piece of debris slammed into his helmet, and he blacked out.

A FEW MINUTES before David's shuttle crashed, Amir and three wingmen flew close escort. *This is shaping up to be a milk run,* he pondered, referencing an old term from long ago that had stuck with fighter jocks. It merely meant that it was going to be a simple flight. Thanks to the drone overflight providing LIDAR coverage of the planet, which David had plugged into the sisters' command net, courtesy of his command authorization codes, they had nearly complete eyes in the sky. It was now impossible for the Monrovians to mousetrap them as they had two days before.

Since they were hitting three separate targets today, Amir had volunteered to take the lead on one escort flight, while Arendse and another one of her flight leaders took point on the other two. He felt like after several combats, the rest of the nuns had come to respect his piloting and combat capabilities, and they had all gelled as a team with the new equipment provided by the CDF.

"Reaper flight," Amir said into the commlink. He had taken the liberty of assigning his own callsign to the group

of four fighters. “This is Reaper One. Maintain close contact with our flock of shuttles.”

“Acknowledged, flight leader,” one of the nuns replied.

Amir was surprised when he detected a flight of twelve fighters appear on his screens at relatively short range. “Reaper flight, I’m reading twelve bogies at one o’clock. Can you confirm on your sensor sweep?”

“Confirmed, flight leader. I show twelve unidentified contacts bearing zero-two-zero, best range, one hundred and twenty-five kilometers.”

Running the flight characteristics through his onboard computer, Amir tried to match them up to known Monrovian types, but they moved faster and had more stealth capabilities than anything known to be in their arsenal. It suddenly dawned on him that this was something else when the missile launch alarm went off, and twelve LIDAR guided missiles were inbound.

“Reaper flight, break, break, break! Drop chaff! We’re being engaged by League fighters!” Amir commanded.

“Say again, flight leader?” the nun flying the fighter to his left asked.

“Obey my orders, Sister! Our lives depend on it!”

“Shuttle flight, this is Amir. Break off and head for base. We’re being engaged by modern League fighters. We’re outnumbered and will try to hold them off. Dive to achieve maximum speed!” Not waiting for a reply, Amir switched to the command channel so he could speak with Arendse directly. “Sister Arendse, this is Amir. We’ve been engaged by hostile forces that appear to be using modern League fighters. What’s your status?”

There was nothing but static on the line. *Damnit, the infidels are using jammers on us. For now, I have to focus on getting us out of this mess*. Amir noted with satisfaction the missiles that had targeted his craft had gone for the chaff

decoys. Swinging his fighter around, he went for the nearest enemy in an attempt to even up the odds.

In the back of the shuttle Calvin was in, both he and the nuns were pressed up in their harnesses as the craft hurtled toward the ground, its pilot engaging a maximum speed dive to outrun the Monrovian fighters that the commlink was full of chatter about. He had heard the mayday call from David's shuttle and grunted as he pushed the harness up against its design and disengaged the lock. The nuns stared at him as he stumbled across the floor and collided with the hatch that led to the cockpit; it took all of his strength to open it up and crawl into the cockpit.

"Ladies," Calvin said. Kaufman stared down at him in shock.

"Colonel Demood, what do you think you're doing?"

"Help me up, would you?"

Kaufman reached down and grabbed his outstretched hand; a moment later, and he had climbed up into and settled into a jump seat. "I just wanted to make sure we're headed in the right direction."

"We can't go back for the others without getting ourselves shot down and killed."

"I'm not leaving David behind," Calvin said, steely resolve creeping into his voice.

"Once we can regroup, we'll use local resources to find them. We don't have enough fighters to take on this new threat. As a seasoned officer, you ought to know that."

"I'm not leaving my brother behind."

"You think I want to leave my sisters behind?" Kaufman practically shouted back at him. "We go back now, all we accomplish is getting ourselves killed, shot down, or

captured. We're better off escaping to fight another day and come back for them when we can help. Now, shut up, Colonel, and let the pilot focus on keeping us alive."

"Reaper leader to shuttle six," called the familiar voice of Amir through an open commlink. "I got the bandit that was chasing you. Head for the barn; we're covering you as best as we can. Our best chance now is to get within range of friendly anti-air defenses; that should give our attackers pause."

Calvin cued his internet comm system to the channel that Amir and the other pilots were using. "Amir, this is Demood. What's the odds of you guys clearing a path for us to get back to Colonel Cohen's shuttle?"

There was a pregnant pause before Amir's voice filled the link. "We would throw our lives away trying and not even harm the enemy, Colonel. I'm sorry."

Calvin's head sagged downward. *Damnit, I can't just leave him behind.* "Okay, drop me out the back of the shuttle. I'll take my chances on my own."

Kaufman just shook her head. "We're over three hundred kilometers away by now. You can't help him right now, Colonel. Calm yourself. I promise you we'll go back, and we'll collectively find a way to rescue him and our sisters. We don't leave our people behind. Nor do we needlessly throw lives away. I'm pretty sure if Colonel Cohen could talk to you right now, he'd order you to do the same."

Yeah, she's right. Cohen would put our lives above his every time. That's why I'm willing to fight and die for his. "You better be right, Sister," Calvin finally said, stewing in anger. The shuttle continued to hurtle back toward the military base they occupied.

26

David woke with a start to find Simone peering down at him. As he opened his eyes, he realized that they were no longer in the shuttle; it appeared she had dragged him free of the wreckage. Shaking his head slowly and trying to clear the daze from his mind, he looked around and saw her standing a few feet away. "Sister," he said, his voice weak and raspy. "Are you okay?"

Simone turned around, holding a medical instrument, and walked back to him. "I was uninjured. Here, lie still. I need to check you for spinal cord damage before you move." She ran the device over him several times at different angles. "Okay, no internal bleeding and your spine's okay."

"That's good. I feel like that shuttle flew into me," David said, trying to sound upbeat and force a smile onto his lips. "Where's everyone else?"

Simone's face and speech resembled a robot. "They didn't make it. We're the only survivors."

Oh no. That's twenty dead at least. She's going into shock. "I'm sorry," David said, somewhat lamely; there was little else to say. "Do you know where we're at?"

Simone shook her head. "We're in a city, though I'm not sure where exactly. The rest of the shuttles pulled back. I

heard chatter on the comm that the Monrovians have deployed the latest generation League military hardware."

"That tracks. We have been kicking their collective posteriors. Simone," David said, trying to make a personal connection with her. "Look, I know what you're going through right now. You've got to remember it's not your fault. You did nothing wrong by surviving. We honor their memory by moving forward and finishing the fight so their sacrifice wasn't made in vain."

Tears fell down Simone's face, and she dissolved into sobs; after a minute or so, she raised her head. "I'm sorry. I know we have to keep going, and I'm being weak."

"Absolutely nothing wrong with showing emotions."

"I'm a little surprised to hear that from an officer in the CDF."

"I tried it the other way… didn't work out so well," David responded, forcing a smile. "Having emotions isn't a weakness. While we're on the subject, anyone who joins, picks up a weapon, and charges into combat to defend people she doesn't even know just because it's the right thing to do… that's not weakness. That's incredible strength of character that I'm honored to serve beside. You don't even get paid to do it either."

Simone showed just a hint of a smile, and David knew he had helped her, even if it was a small comfort.

"Would you like to pray with me, for the fallen?" David asked.

Simone nodded. "I'd like that, very much."

"Why don't you lead us? Unless you'd like me to recite the Jewish prayer for the dead."

"Could we do both?"

"Of course." David bowed his head. "God, filled with mercy, dwelling in the heavens heights, bring proper rest beneath the wings of Your Angels, amid the ranks of the holy

and the pure, illuminating like the brilliance of the skies the souls of our beloved and our blameless who went to their eternal place of rest."

Simone clutched her rosary beads. "O God, by whose mercy the souls of the faithful departed find rest, look kindly on your departed sisters who gave their lives in the service of what was right. Grant that through the passion, death, and resurrection of your Son they may share in the joy of Your heavenly kingdom and rejoice in You with Your saints forever. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen." She glanced at him with a forced smile. "Thank you."

"Anytime, Sister. Now, let's see if I can walk," David said, forcing himself up off the ground. Slowly, he rose, and his legs felt like they would collapse out from under him at first. But then he took a few steps and gained confidence. Nearly every bone and muscle in his body hurt; to counteract that, he used the HUD of his suit to administer pain relief medication of a non-narcotic nature to his bloodstream. It only took a few moments to feel better.

"Are you able to go on?" Simone asked him.

David nodded. "I'm like a good watch. Take a licking and keep on ticking," David replied, continuing to make light of the situation in hopes of boosting her spirits. "If Prime Minister Fitzroy wants to put me out of commission, she'll need to come down here and do it herself. Now, what did you get out of the shuttle?"

Simone pointed a few feet away to a collection of gear stacked haphazardly. "Two battle rifles, three hundred rounds each, fragmentation, plasma and concussion grenades, emergency transmitter, emergency rations, and water pouches."

"Not bad, Sister. I assume you've already tried a distress signal?"

“Yes. Of course, we’re being jammed, but I’m pretty sure they know we’re down here. I heard Colonel Amir and Colonel Demood talking about coming to get you. They couldn’t hear me, though.”

“Demood doesn’t leave people behind, like any good Marine.”

“Neither do we. The sisters will come for us; we have to let them know where we are.”

“That’s the spirit,” David said in encouragement. “Okay, let’s gear up and move out.” He picked up a battle rifle, slung it over his shoulder, and strapped up with ammunition, grenades, and supplies. Simone did the same, and a few minutes later, they were both ready.

Consulting an emergency GPS device that linked into the CDF stealth drones orbiting the planet, David determined the best direction to get out of the city. “We’ll proceed east until we’re out of the urban area and see if we can’t get a comms signal up.”

Simone nodded her understanding, and the two of them set out.

Quietly moving up streets that were quiet and eerily deserted, David took point, his battle rifle up and at the ready, finger on the trigger guard. His HUD flashed a warning that human life signs were detected ahead, and he gave the hand motion for “stop” before ducking behind a parked helicar.

Simone crouched behind the same vehicle and peered over the top of the hood. “Trouble?” she asked.

“Maybe. Can’t be too sure.”

A few minutes later, a patrol of six Monrovian National Guard soldiers walked out from a cross street, slowly making their way across the road David and Simone were on. Both of them were quiet as church mice as the enemy soldiers kept moving. After he was entirely sure they had moved on, and

there was no danger, he stood quietly. “Okay, let’s keep going.”

The two of them pressed forward, taking cover behind helicars and trying to stay as inconspicuous as possible. All of that was shattered in an instant when the door to a business they were passing by swung open, and two Monrovian soldiers strode out, nearly colliding with them. David sprang into action, bringing the butt of his rifle down on the head of one of the men, then turning in place and delivering a series of punches to the face of the second. Simone finished them off with point blank stun rounds to both men’s center mass.

David was about to congratulate her on quick thinking, when shouts rang out behind them, followed rapidly by bullets smacking into the wall over their heads. “Down!” he shouted, making himself as small as he could behind another helicar. The sound of bullets slamming into the helicar coupled with the report of enemy rifle fire was deafening. As soon as he detected the fusillade slow, he popped out of cover and opened up with his battle rifle in three round bursts, felling several attackers. Simone added her own fire and cut down a Monrovian soldier that was trying to flank them.

“I think there’s too many of them,” Simone said as she reloaded her weapon.

“Nah. These guys are weekend warriors. It’d take twenty of them to take us,” David replied with a cocky grin. *The truth is, she’s right, but I need to keep her morale up.*

Then the grenades started going off; fragmentation to the front of them, forcing both David and Simone to keep their heads down, followed by stun grenades landing behind the helicar. He tried to trigger his light filter in time to protect against the effect of the flashbang but was not successful. Holding his ears as his head throbbed, he became

disoriented. He regained his sight to find three Monrovian soldiers directly in front of him.

While David had been invoking some false bravado, he was right about one thing—as professionals, David and Simone trained regularly. They lived it, day in and day out. The enemy they faced drilled one weekend a month. Before any of the soldiers in front of him could get off a shot, David put a three-round burst into the one on the left side; then his battle rifle clicked dry.

Both men that still stood fired on David with their battle rifles. They had standard-issue Monrovian weapons, and as such, they couldn't penetrate the power armor suit he wore. What they could do, though, was make him feel like he'd been gut-punched by a two-hundred-kilo man with iron muscles. Staggering back, he braced himself and launched forward, colliding with the nearest soldier and pushing him to the ground. Pulling back his fist, he punched the unlucky man in the face and broke his nose, causing blood to spray out and temporarily stunning him.

Out of the corner of his eye, David saw Simone engaged in her own hand-to-hand combat. Point-blank rifle fire snapped him back to his problem as the remaining soldier had reloaded and fired thirty rounds on full auto into David's chest. Screaming in pain, he doubled over. *Damn, I think that busted a rib or two.*

David realized as he gasped for air that the wind had been knocked out of him by the impact of the bullets into his armor. Stunned, he lay there as the soldier he faced dropped the spent magazine out of his rifle and slapped another in. The man stepped forward and aimed the gun at point-blank range at the faceplate of David's helmet, its weakest point. There was a loud report of a battle rifle, and much to his surprise, bright red spots appeared in the man's chest. A moment later, the enemy soldier crumpled to the side, dead.

Simone stepped into view above David, holding one of the enemy's weapons; it dropped from her hands, and she collapsed on her knees. "Oh my God... I killed him."

David was finally able to get his breath back as he grunted while sitting up. "Simone, listen to me. It was him or us. You did the only thing you could."

"I've never killed someone before, Colonel..." Simone's hands and body shook out of control.

David reached out and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Killing someone in war isn't murder. Period. It's been recognized throughout history that in a war, especially a just war, which this is by any possible definition, killing your enemy doesn't condemn your soul." He paused for a moment before continuing after she didn't respond. "I'll never forget the first time I took a life; it was on my first ship posting. It was either them or us. I chose us, and I'll choose the men and women I fight with every time."

"The reason I joined the order was so that I didn't have to kill... that I could still do good without the death."

David looked at her with sympathy in his eyes. "I get it, more than you can know, Sister. But right here, right now... we're in a fight for our lives. We've got to press on, escape, and evade. Then and only then will you have time to process what happened. I'll help you if you'd like. Now we keep fighting."

Simone nodded her understanding, and both of them stood. David stumbled a bit, fighting to keep his feet stable beneath him. "I think I need to file a warranty claim with whoever made these suits," he cracked.

"I take it you use humor to cope?"

"Perceptive," David replied as he reloaded his battle rifle. "Yes, it's how I deal with it now, at least until after the battle."

They hadn’t gone more than twenty steps when shouts of “Stop!” and “Halt!” rang out from behind. Sliding into cover as quickly as possible, David picked off a couple of attackers with well-placed shots, leaving them twitching in the middle of the street.

“We need to break contact with these guys fast,” David said.

“Any thoughts on how to do that?”

“I’ll keep them occupied while you fade down the next side street, then blow up one of these helicars and use it as a distraction to follow.”

“I don’t like that plan. We have a better chance of survival if we stay together.”

“You got a better one? We don’t have endless supplies of ammo, and I’m not keen on going back to hand-to-hand combat again.”

Simone made a face inside of her helmet and shook her head. “Okay, but you’re right behind me?”

David nodded. “Absolutely.” He flashed her a smile. At the same time, he pulled a fragmentation grenade off his belt, yanked the pin out, and tossed it toward the advancing enemy soldiers. “Go!”

Simone didn’t need further encouragement; she sprang to her feet and ran as fast as possible while David laid down covering fire. The grenade exploded with a bang, fire and smoke filling the air. He kept up suppressive fire on three separate groups of enemies until his battle rifle clicked dry. Furiously swapping magazines, the opposing force took the opportunity to pour rounds into the helicar he was crouched behind. The vehicle’s hover exhaust fell off, so many bullets hit it. His suit took many additional rounds, but thanks to the velocity of the bullets slowing dramatically after going through the helicar, they had little effect.

As David popped his head up to continue the fight, he realized, with a sinking sensation in his gut, he was greatly outnumbered. No less than eight enemy soldiers were directly in front of him, weapons sighted down. In the split second in which he considered what to do, two more appeared on his right side. “Drop your weapon, terrorist!” one of them yelled.

David let the battle rifle fall onto the hood of the helicar; he took advantage of their limited training and his lightning-fast reflexes, which were enhanced by his power armor. He grabbed a plasma grenade off his belt, dislodging the pin at the same time. “Gentlemen, I would all take a step back if I were you,” he warned. “This will kill anyone within a ten-meter radius, and if any of you make a wrong move, I’ll drop it.” *Unfortunately, it would kill me too, but they don’t need to know I’m worried about that.*

“There’s no way out of here. Make it easier on yourself and surrender,” an older man who appeared to be in charge said as he stepped forward out of the line.

“Are you in charge?” David asked.

“Yes.”

“My name is David Cohen. Might have heard of me… I’m the commanding officer of the CSV *Lion of Judah*. I’m someone you will want to take alive,” David said, shaking the grenade in his hand. “I’m prepared to surrender, but I have terms.”

“You’re not in a position to dictate terms, Colonel Cohen. Reinforcements are on the way, and we have you at a complete disadvantage. Let’s find the pin to that grenade, and we all walk away,” the older man said. David found himself mildly impressed at his demeanor. *At least one of them is a professional.*

“The young woman with me… you allow her to escape. Those are my terms. Small price to pay to bring me in.”

“How am I supposed to do that? There are National Guard and police combing the streets looking for any survivors as we speak here.”

David shrugged. “Get on your commlink, tell them to let her go. Even better, get her a helicar so she can quickly cover ground.”

The man gaped at David like he had grown a second head. “That’s going to take a few minutes.”

David smiled and waved the grenade yet again. “I’ve got all the time in the world.” *This is either going to work or be among the stupidest things I’ve ever done.*

27

A FEW HOURS LATER, MacIntosh was jolted out of his sleep at 0300 CMT by his tablet making an awful racket. Grunting, he reached over and picked it up. The screen flashed red, displaying "Presidential Override Communication" in large text. A single button was visible under the text, marked "Accept Communication." Opening and closing his eyes several times to try to wake up, he pressed his finger against the button, and a moment later, President Spencer appeared on the screen. It looked from the background like he was in his office back on Canaan.

"Andrew, sorry to wake you. We just received word that the Monrovians captured Colonel Cohen when they turned back a strike at several concentration camps."

That got MacIntosh's attention in an instant. He sat up straighter, his eyes opened wide, and his brain went into overdrive. "Do we know that for sure, Mister President?"

"Unless flash human cloning's been perfected in the last week... it's him. They're parading him around on the holonets. The news broke less than fifteen minutes ago."

MacIntosh's head dropped forward. "I'm sorry, sir."

"No blame being assigned, Andrew. We're trying to figure out how it happened. Our intelligence suggested the battle

was well in hand."

"That was my understanding as well, sir. Our projections showed total victory within eight days for the sisters."

There was a considerable amount of crosstalk that MacIntosh couldn't make out between people standing to the side of the president's desk. It took a few seconds for it to clear and Spencer to begin speaking again. "We've got some new information, Andrew. There are credible reports of League cargo ships landing on Monrovia."

"That would explain a great deal, especially why they had success all of a sudden."

"I need you to get down to Canaan and meet with the joint chiefs. I've given the intel community two hours to get to the ground truth of what's going on out there. I'll be looking for your input on how we clean up the mess."

"Yes, sir," MacIntosh replied. *Damn you, Cohen. This has gotten outrageously complicated because you had to play the hero*. "I'll be on my way down in twenty minutes, sir."

"Excellent. Godspeed, Andrew. Spencer out."

MacIntosh set the tablet aside and swung out of bed. *I'm just not as young as I used to be*, he groused to himself, bones creaking as he stood and headed to the shower.

HUNDREDS OF LIGHTYEARS away on Monrovia, the mood in the sisters' command tent was somber. The shuttles and fighters from the aborted strikes had returned, and the order's leadership, as well as Calvin, Hassan, and Tural, had gathered to discuss the events of the day. In the words of the Mother Superior, they would try to find a strategy that would allow them to press forward.

"We got our butts handed to us by these Monrovian assholes," Calvin stated matter-of-factly.

“Language, Colonel Demood,” Sarno said harshly.

“Sorry, ma’am, would you like to beat my knuckles with a ruler and make me write on the board a hundred times I won’t do it again?” Calvin responded caustically.

“Colonel, such hostility does us no good,” Amir said*. We need to stay focused and confident so that we might still win*.

Sarno pointed at the updated battle board that showed new, far more lethal Monrovian units outfitted with the latest League technology. “Our enemy is now capable of fighting us on near equal terms. We need a different strategy,” she said, her voice carrying throughout the room. “I’m open to any logical ideas that do not compromise our principles and allow us to carry on to victory.”

Calvin cleared his throat. “I take it use of strategic weapons is out of the question?”

“Colonel, please. We need serious ideas.”

“I’m sorry, Mother Superior, but I’m sick of using the kid gloves on these guys. We could have struck a knockout blow before them getting supplies from the League.”

Amir put his hand on Calvin’s shoulder. “We’re all friends here. Let us focus on what we can do now, and not recriminations that only serve to divide us,” he said in his soothing baritone voice.

“The big advantage that the Monrovians currently have over us is their upgraded air support capability. They have thirty-four that we’ve seen anyway, sixth-generation space superiority fighters configured for atmospheric flight. We lost two pilots and fighters today, leaving us with ten birds ready for combat,” Arendse said, laying out the crux of the problem.

“Sister, we have ground-impact bombs and missiles with cluster munitions available, do we not?” Amir asked.

“Yes, we do,” Arendse began, then she stopped, a smile forming on her lips. “You want to hit them on the ground.”

Amir bobbed his head up and down. “It’s where they are most vulnerable. They’re likely keeping a few of them on ready five, the rest on ready thirty alert. We already know they aren’t especially good at running more than two sorties in a day, and I can’t believe they have any modern refueling capabilities.”

Sarno’s face perked up as she listened to them. “I requested advanced ECM pods from the CDF… so we have those too.”

“The Monrovians may have updated fighters, but they haven’t had the time to upgrade their entire space/air defense network,” Arendse interjected. “Okay. Let’s say we come up with an operational plan that works. That will leave us facing the rest of their national guard, which now has power armor, advanced tanks, and weapons easily capable of defeating our armor.”

“We need more people,” Kaufman said flatly. “We don’t have enough combat effectives. Doctor Tural, what about the people we’ve rescued? Can any of them fight?”

“A few. But they don’t have military experience for the most part. We learned from debriefing the survivors that anyone who could be considered a threat was separated from the rest and held elsewhere. I’m not sure what throwing inexperienced civilians into the fray with basic training on how to pull the trigger gets us except a lot of dead civilians.”

“I’ve been studying the responses from average Monrovians to the current conflict, and I believe I may have an idea on a way to get more support,” a nun who Amir hadn’t met before said, with what he took to be a slight Russian accent.

“Enlighten us, Sister Chayka,” Sarno said.

“There is a rising tide of discontent among the general population. Despite tight control by the authorities over news broadcasts, there’s something of a black-market news

operation run by people on social media platforms on the holonet. I believe we could harness that black market, if you will. Generate protests, get large numbers of people in the streets. The Monrovians would have to use their paramilitary police forces and National Guard to control the riots, causing them to spread out. Once that occurred, we would be able to launch attacks with impunity again. Assuming we have air superiority, of course."

"What about Colonel Cohen?" Calvin asked pointedly. "When are we going to get him out of there, Mother Superior?"

"Out of where? I want to rescue him as much as you do, but right now, we have no idea where he's being held."

"Is this the point where you tell me that all of this is bigger than one man, and we have to stay on mission?"

Sarno said nothing, but the way her face contorted spoke to anger.

"I'd remind you all if it weren't for this one man, none of us would be here right now, and the Monrovians would've merrily continued killing innocent men, women, and children."

"And we haven't taken losses?" Sarno finally said, her face turning red. "Our order lost more sisters today than we have in the last three years combined. I lament the loss of an outstanding leader and a courageous soldier, but I will not risk the entire fight to save one man or woman. If you can figure out where he's being held, determine how to get him out, and put together a viable plan, bring it to me. I would love nothing more than to save Colonel Cohen… but our focus now has to be on completing what we started."

"If I may," Amir began. "Perhaps it would be better to split into several groups to attack the multitude of problems we face separately." *Hopefully, that will redirect the anger into something more productive.*

Several of the nuns nodded at Amir's suggestion, which Sarno seemed to take note of as her eyes swept about the room. "I agree, Colonel Amir. Would you join the pilots in evaluating our ground attack plan?"

"Of course, Mother Superior."

"The rest of us will review the suggestion to ferment dissent within the populace and strike while they are divided."

"I'm going to find out where they took Colonel Cohen," Calvin said in a loud tone that bordered on rude.

"I wish you luck in that endeavor, Colonel," Sarno responded neutrally. "We will reconvene in the morning. Dismissed."

As soon as "dismissed" left her lips, the nuns filed out of the tent, with Sarno walking out behind them, her long robe dragging across the ground. Calvin, Tural, and Amir were left alone.

"Why does it seem like I'm the only one here pushing to go get the colonel and bring him home?" Calvin asked.

"Cal," Amir said, using his nickname on purpose. "We all want David back. Getting mad and turning on each other and our allies isn't going to get him back. The first thing we must do is neutralize the enemy air power. Once we do that, we'll bring him home."

Calvin sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Amir. I'm wound up tight the last few days. I feel like I let Cohen down by not being there for him."

"I'm pretty sure that Colonel Cohen would tell us all to focus on the mission and not on him."

"He hasn't been obeying orders lately, so why should we?" Calvin asked, a wicked grin on his face.

"I'm more concerned about what the Mother Superior will do to us if we disobey her orders," Tural interjected.

“Let’s get to it, gentlemen,” Amir said. “Three hours isn’t much time to do what we need to get done.”

The other two nodded, and the three men walked out of the tent together. *Allah, please give us strength and give me wisdom to help defeat the infidels*. He realized with a start he’d missed the third prayer of the day and resolved to make the fourth prayer if it all humanly possible.

Aibek peered around the bridge at 1600 CMT onboard the *Lion of Judah*. *I am ready to get some food and retire to my cabin to review reports. I am not sure I would ever want David’s job… he must do far too much paperwork.* Still, commanding the ship even temporarily was an incredible honor. The teamwork and dedication by this group of individuals that became something more than the sum of their parts when all worked together was awe-inspiring. Still, the news that David had been captured had hit the ship hard. The bridge team, and especially the officers and enlisted personnel that worked with David daily, were in a funk and chafed at not being able to help get him home.

“Conn, communications,” Taylor said from his station. “Incoming flash traffic, CDF Command. I have General MacIntosh on active vidlink.”

“Put him through to my view, Lieutenant,” Aibek replied, looking up at the small viewscreen above the CO’s chair that David usually sat in.

The unsmiling face of General MacIntosh snapped onto the screen. “Good day, General, sir.”

“Good afternoon, Colonel Aibek. What is the ship’s status?” MacIntosh asked, all business.

“All systems are normal, and we’ve sustained minimal battle damage, sir.”

“Good. I have new orders for you. Proceed at best speed to Monrovia and set up a blockade of the system.”

“Sir?” Aibek asked, incredulous. *Perhaps honor may be restored by saving Colonel Cohen. No, David. My friend.*

“You heard me, Colonel. Blockade the system. Your orders are specifically to prevent any League of Sol military vessels or ships carrying League military hardware from landing. Use whatever force is required to accomplish the objective.”

“What about rescuing Colonel Cohen?”

“Let’s get something straight right now, Lieutenant Colonel Aibek. There will be no military interventions by the Terran Coalition, or any ship flagged as a CDF vessel on the surface of Monrovia. The blockade will prevent the flow of arms, nothing more. If you or any member of the *Lion*’s crew attempts to attack Monrovian government assets, you’ll be court-martialed and drummed out of the military. Do I make myself clear?”

Aibek nodded uneasily, his scales flaring. “Crystal clear, sir.”

“Colonel Cohen got himself into this mess by disobeying orders. Don’t think that I’m not aware of the little stunt you pulled in taking out the satellite network’s control center. Be thankful that your leaders and President Spencer agree with the morality of your actions. Otherwise, you’d already be out. Make damn sure the rest of your people understand the stakes here. The entire galaxy is watching, and the Terran Coalition isn’t invading a neutral planet.”

“Sir, permission to speak freely?”

“Denied. Carry out your orders, Colonel. MacIntosh out.”

The viewer blinked off, leaving Aibek sitting in the chair, his mouth agape. *This is… dishonorable. Evil must be opposed by the just.*

“Sir, are we really going to abide by those orders?” Ruth asked, openly breaking bridge protocol.

“Lieutenant, we have our orders,” Aibek said, setting his jaw and sitting up in the chair.

“Seriously, sir? We’re just going to execute a blockade and leave Colonel Cohen to rot?”

“What would you have us do, Lieutenant? Launch an unauthorized invasion?”

“We could for starters provide better intelligence to the sisters. How about additional air support, or a special warfare team. There are options short of a full-scale invasion.”

“Lieutenant, you are out of line. If you cannot hold yourself to the standards required to serve at your post, I will relieve you of duty,” Aibek stated in his unflappable, matter-of-fact tone.

Ruth’s face turned blood-red, her cheeks puffed in and out, and her fists clenched. “What are your orders, sir?” she finally asked, voice dripping with contempt.

“Prepare the LIDAR system for multiple target acquisition. You will need to work closely with the pilots to track and inspect all vessels coming and going from Monrovia.”

“Yes, sir,” Ruth grated out before turning around in her chair to face the void.

The thing about it, she’s not wrong. Damn politicians. A shame this wasn’t a Saurian operation. There’d be no question of doing whatever it took to get a warrior home. “Navigation, plot Lawrence drive jump to Monrovia.”

“Plot Lawrence drive jump to Monrovia, aye aye, sir,” Hammond said.

Aibek sat back in the chair, thinking through possibilities. *Perhaps the opportunity to help Cohen will present itself in a way that doesn’t require breaking orders. Until then, we will press on with our duty.*

28

Over the previous ten hours since his capture, David had been roughed up and left bloodied and bruised. There were some attempts at questioning him, but nothing that gave him pause or came remotely close to obtaining information. Now, though, he sensed the situation was changing. He'd been marched into a room while blindfolded and strapped into a chair that seemed built solely for torture from what he could tell. He heard the breathing of another person, and then a male voice very close to him.

"Hello, Colonel Cohen. How are you doing today?"

David couldn't quite place the accent, but the sound of it reminded him of a hissing snake.

"Name, David Cohen. Rank, Colonel. Serial Number, 50-6813560FP."

The other man laughed. "I'm already aware of that information, Colonel. I wish to discuss other matters."

"I want to retire and become a rabbi. We've got all dreams."

The blindfold was suddenly ripped off, leaving David to rapidly close his eyes amid the brightness of the light directed at his face. "You have spirit… good. That will make

helping you to see the truth of your existence an even greater triumph of reason over superstition."

David blinked several times, trying to see the man attached to the voice, but could only get vague glimpses of him. "If you're going to try to convince me there's no God, don't waste your breath," he said in a steady voice.

The lights dimmed for a moment, allowing David to take in the sight of the interrogator, a short man with Asian features. He appeared to be middle-aged, but the most important detail was his uniform, which consisted of a black utility suit, standard issue in the League of Sol. *So, they brought in a professional. I should be so lucky.*

"I'm not only going to convince you there is no God, but I'm also going to help you convince others of it," the man said. He turned and gestured at four paintings on the wall. "How many pictures do you see here, Colonel?"

"Four."

"Really? I could be sure there's five. Look again."

David rolled his eyes. "Let me guess… two plus two equals five? What's next, you're going to take me to room 101?"

The man laughed again. "I like you, Colonel. I suppose it's a bit of whimsy on my part. I see we've both read the same book, though it's been a very long time since it was the year 1984." The lights turned up again, and the man got very close to David's face. "Let's get a few things straight here, shall we? First, you don't exist anymore. No one is coming for you. Your friends have no idea where you are. Second, I control your life. I hold it in my hands. Help me, and you might walk out of here. Refuse, and you will die in agony. Third, nothing you have ever done has ever prepared you for being questioned by the League. I dedicate my life to honing my craft. I take it very, very seriously. Breaking you will be my crowning achievement."

Great, I got a raging narcissist as an interrogator. "Hopefully, not breaking me won't impact your next League efficiency review."

The man smiled in a way that made David shiver to his bones. "How many soldiers do the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense have landed on Monrovia?"

"None… they don't have soldiers. They're all nuns," David said in his best attempt at a cheeky tone. Immediately, he regretted it as pain shot through his body, as if every nerve was on fire at once. Unable to control himself, he let out a blood-curdling scream.

It took a few seconds for the pain to stop registering, even after the device causing it was turned off. When David's mind finally did clear, he saw the man smiling and looking down at him. "Now we're going to stop with the smart-mouth answers. How many nuns are on the planet?"

"Fifty thousand," David replied, remembering his training to give fake but believable information over no information.

"You're lying. I already know there are less than eight thousand nuns deployed here."

"Then why are you asking me?"

"Because I want you to know that I know far more than you think I do so that when you lie to me, it will be exceedingly painful."

"Bring it on," David said, and immediately, the searing pain shot through him again, causing another ear-shattering scream.

"Now let's address a different subject," the man began after waiting thirty seconds for David's mental faculties to return. "I'd like you to admit to me that there is no God."

"Never."

"I see," he said, then spoke into a commlink. "Bring in the prisoner, please."

The door swung open, and two guards wearing the uniform of the League manhandled a young woman in a nun's robe and habit into the room. "So, you say there's a God?"

"Without question."

The man reached out his hand, and one of the guards handed him a standard-issue League sidearm. "Would you also say this woman, a sister of God… a nun, who has sworn her life to the service of God himself, is someone He'd care about?"

"God cares about everyone equally."

"Would he care if I killed her in front of you?"

"Of course. It would be added to the list of sins you've committed, which I'm sure is extraordinarily long."

"Would he care enough to stop me?"

"God doesn't directly control our actions. We all have free will, and the agency to do what we want."

"So he cares about us but doesn't care enough to do anything to help us?"

"He helps us all the time. The incredible rarity of life, the infinite combinations of creation, how everything works together and allows all of us to live. The technology we've discovered because of the mental capabilities given to us and the other races that live in our galaxy. All of it, from the big bang to now, reflects God's care and love."

"You believe this shit," the interrogator blurted out, apparently surprised. "A pity." He lowered the sidearm and shot the nun in both kneecaps. She screamed even louder than David had, blood flowing freely from her wounds.

"Would you like to receive medical attention?" the interrogator asked her.

"Please," she said, unsteady and half delirious from the pain.

“We’re not uncivilized people… simply renounce God, and I will have you treated by the best physicians in the League.”

She looked up at him, her eyes narrowing, and with a strength of character David found inspiring, shook her head. “Never. I’ll die first. My soul will go to heaven. This body is nothing more than a shell. I will not spit on my Lord to save it.”

“You fanatics always start the same, blathering on about God this and God that. Sometimes I even encounter a few of you that keep going on about it as you die,” the man said, before casually shooting her in the head. Her lifeless body slumped to the floor, and David felt pure blinding rage build within him.

David first tried to rip the restraints off, but they were just too strong and he too weak. He was trapped; then the pain hit again, washing over him like a sea of fire. “Oh, Colonel, you can’t break free. You’d need a laser cutter to get out of those bonds. Now, where were we? Oh yes, I’d like you to admit that God isn’t real.”

David recalled the book of Job, where his wife encouraged him to curse God and die after he’d lost everything and been scourged with boils. He lifted his head and dug deep within to find the will to continue to resist. “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. I’ve served Him my entire life. I served Him yesterday, I serve Him today, and if I still draw breath, I’ll serve Him tomorrow. Blessed be the name of Lord my God!”

The face of the interrogator twisted into an angry mask, and he pressed the button to administer pain yet again. David screamed in agony yet again, and his body felt as if it was on fire. Unlike the rest of the times he’d used the button, this time, the man held it down.

David kept screaming, thrashing, trying to break free, and then everything went dark as unconsciousness took him.

Kenneth felt his commlink buzz as he made his through the chow line at one of the primary mess halls onboard the *Lion of Judah*. He glanced down and furrowed his brow when he saw the message was from Calvin. *Well, I can't take that in the middle of the mess.* He slid out of line and headed toward the exit. Looking around for someplace private, he stepped into a single-person male bathroom and locked the door. After pressing his thumb against the fingerprint reader to unlock his tablet, he was treated to Calvin's unsmiling face.

"Kenneth, thought I was going to have to leave you a vidmail," Calvin said without preamble.

"Sorry, Colonel, I was at the chow hall. Had to find a private place to talk."

"I need you to pull some info for me."

"What kind of info?"

"Colonel Cohen had some stealth drones on station, performing passive and active scans of Monrovia. Could you tap into them and help us try to find him?"

Kenneth furrowed his brow, deep in thought. "I might be able to do one better, sir. The *Lion of Judah* is now in the system."

"Wait, what? You're at Monrovia?" Calvin asked incredulously.

"Yeah. I'm not entirely sure why, but the brass ordered us in to enforce a blockade of the planet. Something about preventing League arms shipments. We're stopping every incoming freighter and sending a VBSS team to inspect it," Kenneth replied, referencing Visit, Board, Search, and Seizure teams.

"That makes things a bit easier. When are the Marines coming?"

“They’re not. Colonel Aibek’s made it clear that our orders are not to interfere with anything going on the planet. I’m liable to lose my ability to work for the CDF just for talking to you.”

“Why’d you take my call, then?”

Kenneth smiled. “Because it’s not often I get to walk out at the end of a day and say I did something that made a difference. Well, and I’m worried about my friends.”

“The day I need a slimy defense contractor as a friend…”

“You got any information on where Colonel Cohen was captured?”

“We’ve got the general target area, why?”

“I’ll pull the data from the drones and get some help in writing an algorithm to parse out what happened. With visual imagery, we should be able to track him down.”

“Time is something we don’t have a lot of. Things are going from bad to worse down here.”

“It’s my top priority as of now, Colonel.”

There was a loud flushing noise from the bathroom next to the one that Kenneth occupied.

“What the heck was that?”

“Someone flushed the toilet in the ladies’ room.”

“You’re talking to me in the head?”

“Yeah.”

Calvin chuckled. “Couldn’t find somewhere, literally anywhere else to take the call?”

“It was here, or an airlock. I prefer the head to an airlock.”

“Valid point, Kenny.”

Kenneth rolled his eyes in annoyance; he detested that nickname. “Anything else?”

“Not right now. Get us a location on David, then we’ll take it from there.”

“Roger that. Lowe out,” Kenneth said.

“Out here.”

Calvin’s picture blinked off the screen, and it went dark. Kenneth returned his tablet to his belt and pondered what to do next. The best computer scientist on the ship was also its most difficult-to-motivate human. *Oh well, I’ll never know if he’ll help unless I try*, Kenneth considered as he washed his hands and walked out of the bathroom, heading for Dr. Hayworth’s office. Dinner was now a distant memory.

29

David awoke with a start in his cell. It was pitch black, and he had no idea how long he'd been out, how long he'd been in the cell, or even what time of the day or night it was. Then he realized he couldn't move. He realized with a start that he was in a squat, and his arms were tied behind his back. He tried to roll over, but there was some obstruction that kept him from moving. *Great, stress positions.*

"Adonai, please hear my prayer," David whispered in Hebrew. "If it is Your will, save me from this place, give me the strength to resist, and to stay true to Your precepts and word. Amen."

There was no way for him to measure the passage of time, but his leg muscles began to burn, then cramp. Eventually, there was no way to block the pain. It overwhelmed him, leaving him to cry out. He drifted in and out of consciousness and was only vaguely aware of the guards that came in and removed him from the enclosure he was in and dropped him on the floor. After they left, he was startled to hear a woman's voice call out. "David?"

David shivered and felt like someone had walked on his grave. He'd never forget the sound of that voice. "Sheila?"

"It's me."

“No, you’re dead. I’m hallucinating.”

“Were you hallucinating when I came to you in a vision a few weeks ago?”

“That was different…” David closed his eyes, trying to get control over himself. “They must have worked me over pretty good.”

“They did. You’re lucky to be alive at this point. That dreadful Leaguer held the button down for thirty-six seconds. The manual states the maximum dose is twenty seconds.”

David, in spite of everything, snickered. “Guess I’ll tell him to get a stronger machine for next time.”

“Maybe you should stop trying to piss him off and focus on surviving?”

“Oh, I’m focused on surviving. I was hoping if I got under his skin, he’d lose control and have to be replaced. Maybe buy me a few more hours.”

“You don’t think you can keep from giving up information?”

“I’m not even sure what information I have that would be of value to them. The operational plans are shot to heck, and I’m sure that the League has enough sensor systems to know exactly what we have and what we don’t have. Still, I won’t give up what I do just in case.”

“Still stubborn as an ox,” Sheila observed.

“You must be my brain trying to calm me down.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.”

“You know that reporter likes you.”

“No, she doesn’t… she thought I played her and was mad as Hades,” David said.

“Oh, David, you really are clueless at times about the fairer sex. She was mad because she likes you and felt

personally betrayed. Then she was happy to be wrong when she assessed your reaction."

He coughed repeatedly. "If you say so. If I ever get out of here, maybe I'll find out."

"*If* you get out of here? Don't you have faith they'll come for you?"

"They've got a war to fight. I wouldn't expect the sisters to drop everything and come for me. It's up to me to keep fighting as a POW. I can still fight and will continue to resist with honor as long as I can."

David felt a hand take his and squeeze tightly. "That's my David, always keeping up the good fight."

"Somebody's got to. One thing's for sure… I'm in for a world-class dressing down from General MacIntosh. I'm not sure what's worse; this League interrogator or MacIntosh coming after me."

Sheila laughed softly. "Only because he likes you. It's time for me to go. Stay strong, okay?"

"I'll try to."

"Godspeed, David," Sheila replied, and then David felt she was no longer there. *Maybe I am going nuts. I pray the sisters are still moving forward and they've found a way to overcome the League forces arrayed against them*. If anyone could keep going in the face of outrageous odds, it's that Mother Superior. *She is one tough lady*. Deciding he needed to try to rest, he closed his eyes and forced himself to drift into sleep.

KENNETH WALKED into Hayworth's lab to find the temperamental scientist using a laser fuser on a circuit board, humming some tune he didn't recognize to himself. The lab looked as it normally did on the few occasions he had

to visit; experiments, tablets, equipment tossed everywhere. At the interruption, Hayworth switched off the fuser and looked up with a snarling expression. “I had my do-not-disturb notification up! What do you want?” he spat at Kenneth.

“Um, I’m sorry to bother you, Dr. Hayworth,” Kenneth said, suddenly a bit unsure what he was about to ask.

“Oh, just out with it. And remember, I don’t want to do any side work for that dreadful company you work for.”

Kenneth grimaced, remembering a previous attempt to strike up a conversation with Hayworth that resulted in the doctor going off on him for half an hour about how slimy defense contractors were. “I need your help to find Colonel Cohen.”

Hayworth stopped what he was doing and looked down the rim of his glasses at Kenneth. “What can I possibly do to help you locate the good colonel?”

“I’ve got visual feeds and scan records from one of our stealth drones over Monrovia. When his shuttle crashed, there’s got to be a visual record of that in there. If we get lucky and he made it out, Colonel Demood and I are hoping there’s a way to track him back to whatever installation he’s being held at.”

“And then the Marines charge in to save the day and shoot the bad guys?” Hayworth asked in his normal acerbically mocking tone.

“Something like that, Doctor.”

“Well, just great. I had important science to do this afternoon, and now you want me to hunt for a needle in a haystack.”

“Colonel Cohen’s life is in danger. He’s no doubt being tortured.”

Hayworth’s expression softened. “What do you even want me to do here? I’m not an intelligence analyst, you know.”

Hmmm. Maybe the way to get him to do is to goad him. "Well, I mean it's so simple. We need to get an algorithm that can track the colonel's visual signature and determine where he was taken. You're right, I shouldn't have bothered you. I'll find one of the intel guys and have them run it down for me."

Hayworth harrumphed and cleared his throat. "Are you trying to say I can't do a simple task, Mr. Lowe?"

"Well no, I just don't want to waste your time."

"Do you have the data with you?"

Kenneth held up a data chip container. "It's all here. Ten exabytes in total."

Hayworth held out his hand. "Give me that. I'll have an answer for you within two hours," he said smugly.

"You sure, Doctor? Seriously, I don't want to bother you from the pursuit of science."

Hayworth snatched the container from Kenneth's hand. "I'm not as dumb as you seem to think I am, Mr. Lowe. Now get out and let me examine the data."

"Sure thing, Doc," Kenneth said, turning on his heel and walking out the door.

"Don't call me Doc!" Hayworth shouted as Kenneth turned out the door.

Kenneth smiled to himself as he walked down the passageway. *Well, that worked out. Time for a late dinner.*

30

This mission has evolved, derailed, and turned into a fight for survival. Sarno stood in the command tent, staring down at the map of the planet's surface that showed all of the camps they still needed to liberate, and the new concentrations of enemy forces. Her two top lieutenants, Arendse and Kaufman, stood nearby, pondering the map as well.

"Sisters, I fear I've led us into a situation that has caused much suffering," Sarno finally said to break the silence. They were due to have a general briefing in another ten minutes.

"I think I speak for the entire order, Mother Superior, when I say that your leadership has been exemplary in this dire hour. We've accomplished much and saved many lives. The battle may still be won," Arendse replied.

"I fear the cost," Sarno said. "After all, what good is defeating this enemy only to wipe out our order or cause so many casualties that we set back the rest of the progress we've made throughout the galaxy."

"God tests us in so many ways, I've lost count," Kaufman began. "What I know is that of all the causes I've fought for, in my prior service and with this order, there's never one

I've been surer of. Regardless of the cost, I think God wants us here."

Sarno smiled. "It's such an honor to walk His path with you and the rest of our sisters. I challenged you all for a way forward; do we have it?"

Arendse cleared her throat and stepped forward. "The lynchpin is taking out their air assets. Colonel Amir and I have a plan. It's bold and risky. I believe it'll work."

The flap to the tent opened, and the other sisters streamed in, along with Calvin, Amir, and Tural. Sarno had specially invited Simone to recognize her for the daring escape she'd made from the Monrovians. Everyone milled about for a couple of minutes until a quorum had assembled. Sarno cleared her throat; a distinctive sound that every sister in the order knew by heart.

"Sisters, honored guests," Sarno said as she glanced around the room. Her gaze stopped on Calvin, Tural, and Amir, who stood together. "We need a better title for you three. How does 'honorary monk' sound?"

"I don't care what you call me, as long as you're talking about me," Calvin replied to snickers from many of the nuns; even Sarno's face showed the crease of a smile.

"Well put, Colonel Demood," Sarno said, continuing her monologue. "We have faced a serious setback in this fight. I spent last night on my knees asking the saints and the Holy Mother herself to intercede our behalf. I considered if we should even continue. But, I believe our order is called to do good by checking evil whenever, however, and wherever we can. Today, we can do the most good on Monrovia by stopping this tyrannical government from killing its citizens and allying with the League of Sol. I challenged our leaders to devise a sound tactical plan for defeating this enemy. Sisters, what do you have for us?"

Kaufman stepped forward. “We’ve got a three-prong strategy to bring the fight to the enemy and defeat them, Mother Superior. Allow me to start by saying it is extremely high risk. However, after discussions between the sisters and Colonels Demood and Amir, we all agree that any strategy that doesn’t go for a knockout blow immediately is doomed to failure. Our resources are finite and far smaller than the Monrovians. Every minute we give them to integrate more League equipment into their armed forces, the worse it gets. We’ve also got to assume the League will send more supplies and munitions. Our plan is deceptively simple. Sister Chayka has been working the planetary holonet, using bot farms to stir up pockets of dissent. We plan to stage demonstrations in every major city on the planet later today, which will coincide with us attacking their main government complex. We believe that if we take out the head of state, the rest of the government will implode due to the lack of leadership.”

“For any of this to work,” Arendse interjected, “we’ll have to take out their air capabilities. We’re going to split into two elements of five fighters each and attack them on the ground.”

“I would expect the Monrovians to have an active combat air patrol, Sister. Have you accounted for that?” Sarno asked.

“Yes, ma’am. We’re outfitting several shuttles with air-to-air missiles and ECM pods, and we’ll use them to spoof the Monrovians into thinking they’re an attacking force, while we sneak in at low altitude, using stealth and our ECM to avoid detection.”

Calvin raised his hand.

Sarno eventually took notice. “Yes, Colonel?”

“Well, I have some updated intelligence this morning. I know where Colonel Cohen is being held.”

“And that is?”

“Black site prison complex, rural area. Something we can hit with a couple of hundred troops and take relatively easy. I got plans for the place from Monahan.”

“I appreciate the initiative, Colonel. Sister Kaufman, do we have the troops to spare?”

Sarno watched as Kaufman made eye contact with Calvin, and immediately saw sadness in her eyes. “No, we don’t, Mother Superior. Our plan calls for every available sister to assault the capital government complex at the same time. I’ll have a reserve element, but I can’t risk it without introducing an overwhelming chance of failure to our main operation.”

Calvin’s face contorted. “That’s just freaking great,” he said, his emotions rising to the surface. “So we leave my brother to die? Guess what… that’s where they took your sisters too. We owe it to them to get them out of there! The League will kill them all if it looks like the government will fall.”

“We’ll turn our attention there once the battle is won, Colonel Demood.”

Calvin crossed his arms and set his jaw. “Not good enough.”

A small voice in the back of the room stood out: Simone’s. “Mother Superior, may I speak?”

Sarno glanced toward her and smiled. “Yes, child.”

“Colonel Cohen put his life on the line for me. That’s the only reason I got away. I now owe it to him to put my life on the line for his. I want to organize a volunteer assault on this black site he’s being held at. Perhaps Colonel Demood would be willing to lead it.”

“But we have no spare troops, Sister Darzi,” Kaufman insisted.

“Yes, we do. There’s many walking wounded that can still fight. Some refugees are willing to fight. If we can raise

enough volunteers, let us try. Nothing is lost if we fail, except our own lives, which we would give willingly."

Calvin turned and stared at her, his face and demeanor betraying his shock. "You'd do that for the colonel, Miss?"

"He surrendered to save me. The least I owe him is trying to save his life," Simone answered.

This sounds like a suicide mission… but we owe David a rescue attempt. Not to mention the rest of those held there. We still have three sisters unaccounted for. "Make it known this is strictly volunteer. We won't be able to help you while we're assaulting the government complex. There will be no air support except your shuttles. Are we all clear?"

"Yes, Mother Superior," Simone quickly said.

"Crystal," Calvin replied.

"Sister Kaufman, do we have a timetable for our actions to commence?"

"Yes, Mother Superior. Ground crews are servicing our fighters and shuttles as we speak. We'll be ready to move in two hours."

"I haven't given the order to go yet," Sarno pointed out.

"We didn't want to waste time, assuming you approved the operation," Kaufman answered with a small smile.

She knows me too well. They all do. "Then in two hours, we begin our attack. I suggest we retire to the chapel and say one last mass before battle. The rest of you," she said while glancing toward Calvin, Amir, and Tural, "may prepare as you see fit. Godspeed to you all."

After the meeting adjourned, Calvin made his way out of the tent and looked up at the sky. "I don't know if You're up there. If You are, we could use some help about now," he

said, speaking to no one around him. Lowering his head, he found Simone standing in front of him.

"You're not sure He exists, Colonel?" Simone asked.

"I'm pretty sure there's an intelligent entity that created the universe. Do I know if it cares about what happens in this universe... no," Calvin replied. "The truth is half the time I'm a Christian in name only. But you know what? If there is God, He gave me a unique skill set. So let's put it to good use and go shoot some assholes, get Colonel Cohen, and call it a day."

Simone chuckled and shook her head. "I should remind you of the rules against swearing and half a dozen other things. Truth is, though, I appreciate your rather simplistic outlook at times."

"You'd get along with my wife," Calvin said while laughing himself.

"Follow me. The infirmary recovery ward seems like a decent place to start our recruiting efforts."

Calvin fell in behind the young novice and followed her across the base to the hospital they had occupied. Numerous nuns acting as medics milled about what had been its admitting room, treating a couple hundred lightly injured patients. Some were nuns themselves; others were Monrovians rescued from the camps.

"Excuse me," Simone called out, but no one paid attention.

Now, this is something I can fix. "Attention on deck!" Calvin roared.

Practically everyone in the room stopped what they were doing and stared at him. Conversations ceased in an instant, and the area became whisper quiet. "Sister Darzi would like to speak with you," Calvin said, gesturing to Simone. "Sister, you're up."

Simone looked across the room, and Calvin saw her face tighten up. *Own it*, *girl*. "Sisters, survivors, friends. I come to you to ask you to join Colonel Demood and me on a rescue mission. Three members of our order and another CDF officer, Colonel David Cohen, are being held captive by the Monrovians. We believe they're being tortured by League intelligence agents. Every combat-effective sister is tasked with assaulting the planet's main government complex. While they end this war and topple the corrupt government, I need your help to save these four souls. Who will stand with me?"

A few nuns that had bandages around wounds on their arms and legs stood and walked forward. Another sister with her right arm in a sling stood as well; at Calvin's questioning look, she smiled back at him. "I'm just as accurate with a pistol as I am with a rifle."

Calvin couldn't help but grin in return. *We ought to recruit these ladies into the TCMC. With this kind of esprit de corps, they could take Earth itself.*

"Are there any more? We have four shuttles, and I need at least sixty volunteers to make the mission viable," Simone asked.

Several more nuns stood, as did a couple of civilians. Simone's face clouded over, and she spoke again. "There is no greater love than for a man to lay down his life to save another," she said, quoting the Bible. "We've all done that for each other, and some of us have done it for the people in this very room. Can you not find it within yourself to reach deep inside, and do the same to save four souls who will surely perish?"

Calvin found himself thinking that the entire exercise was a waste of time until entire rows of nuns began to stand, some barely able to walk. He decided it was now time for his own unique brand of encouragement. "Now those are some

great words, Sister, but I'm just a Marine. So if there's anyone here, and yes, I'm talking to you in the back, anyone who knows how to fire a weapon and wants to put some hurt on the bastards that harmed you, your families, and your friends, get in line, because we're about to deliver some pain on the League and its Monrovian puppets."

It's just a question of proper motivation, Calvin thought to himself as some male civilians stood up and stepped forward. "I think we've got enough, Sister," he said to Simone with a big grin on his face.

"You... are a handful."

"Yeah, that sounds like my wife. Sure you didn't get her commlink number or something?"

Simone rolled her eyes at him, though with a smile. "Okay, everyone, follow me!" she shouted at those who had assembled. "Let's get some gear and get in the air!"

31

WHIPPING through the atmosphere at nearly nine thousand kilometers an hour, Amir's fighter rocked gently as he adjusted its course to make up for the crosswind that was pushing his craft to the right at one hundred kilometers an hour. The nimble fighter was weighed down with as many bombs and missiles as could be carried; the idea being they would launch a preemptive strike on the Monrovians' new high-tech fighters then finish off whatever was in the air. If there were any stores left, well, then they'd be able to support the ground troops, but he doubted anything would be left except their wing-mounted energy weapons.

"Credit for your thoughts, Colonel?" Arendse's deep, accented voice asked on the private commander's commlink.

"I find myself wishing we had CDF logistical support, Sister," Amir said, grimacing involuntarily, even though she couldn't see him.

"I suppose, to you, our operations are haphazard."

"I wouldn't characterize it that way, just you seem to patch holes up with space tape. We take craft out of service and put new parts in."

"We don't have that luxury, I'm afraid. I wish we did, but we make do with what we're lucky enough to get or have

donated to us. We rebuild components over and over, rather than buy new. While most systems are component-driven and modules are considered throwaway, our monks perform board-level repairs on every piece of electronics we own. From the latest and greatest technology, all the way back to those assault landers that were fit to be retired twenty years ago that we fly around in," Arendse said, her tone veering toward being defensive.

"It's nice," Amir conceded, "to have a massive logistical operation on every carrier that quickly turns around our fighters for another sortie. Do not think I'm not in awe of your ability to keep planes up, I lament that we're going into battle down two birds, and with another three in various states of damage. There's only ten of us up here and having anything that's not optimum makes our job that much harder."

"If it were easy, everyone would do it. Honestly, Amir, it's not the disrepair of our fighters that's the hardest thing about this job. It's how some of the other sisters look at us... at me."

"I don't understand. How do they look at you differently?"

"Because the pilots are the few among the order that, by simply going into battle, kill the enemy. There's no technological cheat, no gimmick we can use. We all have very deeply held beliefs, and while I know that most don't look down on us... some of my sisters pity us, which is even worse, at least for me."

Amir kept one eye on his bearing and altitude, which showed they were still a few minutes out from the target. "I wouldn't have thought of it that way," he said. "I find the abilities and courage of you and your fellow pilots to be exemplary, if that counts for anything."

“To hear that from an accomplished pilot and warrior like you, Colonel, it does.”

“I, too, struggle with the things we must do in service of our cause and country. There is a near constant battle within; Muslims call this the greater Jihad. Our first focus must be to strive for the path that God has set out before us.”

“I thought Jihad was a war against unbelievers?”

“It was in the past in both mainstream and fringe groups. After the Exodus, all religions underwent some amount of reformations, mine included. What we now call the lesser Jihad is the one you speak of, though it is only defensive in nature, and we seek to gain new converts only through the tongue and the pen.”

“Are you going to try to convert me, Colonel?” Arendse said with a small laugh.

“Given the level of commitment shown to your faith, I wouldn’t think of it. I am also proud to say that I greatly respect the people of the book, both Christian and Jew. I mean, my best friend is an Orthodox Jew.”

“I read in the history books that Muslims and Jews used to fight each other constantly, as did Christians. The idea that we once killed one another in large quantities seems so… hard to believe.”

“As bad as the World Society and the League of Sol is now, it did something vitally important. It forced us to confront the fact that despite our differences, we’re all very much alike. Everyone is a child of Allah, and now we exist under the bonds of kinship and brotherhood.”

“Silver linings, eh?”

“Always,” Amir replied. “If I weren’t looking for silver linings, I wouldn’t survive my time in this universe. I must trust that Allah puts me in the right situations to make a difference.”

“Same here, Colonel. What’s our plan again?”

“Sneak in at low altitude, drop our smart bombs on the parked fighters, take out anything that moves in the air, and as Colonel Demood would say, kick the enemy’s butt and get home in time for dinner.”

Arendse laughed hard across the commlink. “The three of you are quite the pairing.”

“In the few months we’ve been serving together, I see the lot of us as providing some balance. Colonel Cohen especially can keep things on an even keel. It is such a pleasure to serve with him again.”

“You knew him before the *Lion of Judah*?”

“He was the XO of a carrier I was assigned to as a squadron commander. I ended up as the XO for the wing on that ship. My first true command.”

“Good memories?”

“Take out the war… yes. Some of the best years of my service,” Amir replied, wistfully thinking back. “Okay, it’s time to slow our approach, so we blend in with the other air traffic around this military base.”

“Roger that.”

Amir switched his communication channel to the pre-set for the squadron. “Christus flight, slow to 1500 kilometers per hour and follow me down to fifty meters off the deck.”

“Acknowledged, flight lead,” one of the pilots responded; Amir hadn’t been flying with them long enough to recognize everyone’s voice automatically as he did back on the *Lion of Judah*.

As he guided his fighter down, the rush was incredible as the nimble craft zoomed over the landscape so low that he could make out people on the ground and small details. They passed over an outdoor gathering that left shocked attendees pointing at the sky in amazement. Amir watched the LIDAR display, continuing to pray that whatever early warning

capabilities the Monrovians had, they wouldn't see the sisters and him coming until it was far too late.

"Switch to ground attack focus," Amir called out into the comm. "Pre-load bomb impact location targets provided in pre-flight and stand by to release ordinance."

Amir started the mission clock at ninety seconds, trying not to stare as it counted down. His eyes split between the LIDAR display and looking forward out of the cockpit while performing visual sweeps every few seconds to ensure proper situational awareness. At a little under sixty seconds to target, the LIDAR screen began to show a tightly grouped set of four contacts; the system quickly classified them as military craft.

"Sister Arendse, do you see a group of four fighters at our one o'clock on your LIDAR?"

"I do, Colonel. The bearing and speed look like alert fighters just launching from the airbase we're on the way to hit."

"I was afraid of that," Amir replied, beginning to run tactical possibilities through his brain. "We'll stay low and slow, and see what they do," he said after deciding on a course of action. "We might get lucky and get in a first strike." *If we don't get an effective bombing run in, Allah protect us because we'll be overwhelmed*.

For a few moments, Amir began to believe they'd get that critical first hit in before the master alarm sounded. The HUD overlaid on his helmet immediately showed the threat — many ground-launched surface-to-air missiles— zooming toward him and the rest of the sisters' fighter force.

"Christus flight, break and deploy countermeasures," Amir said calmly into the commlink.

"Should we drop our bombs?" Arendse asked hesitantly.

"Not yet," Amir responded on the private channel. "While we will be sluggish with so many munitions slapped onto our

fighters, we still need to make that strike. Break right with me and climb. Deploy chaff!"

Taking his own advice, Amir triggered the chaff launcher and pulled back hard on the flight stick, at the same time mentally commanding his fighter to increase thrust to the maximum. Slammed back into the flight couch, he came close to blacking out as his craft pulled 16-Gs in an attempt to avoid the enemy missiles and remain able to fight.

HALF A CONTINENT AWAY, Calvin looked over at Simone, who sat in the jump seat of the first assault shuttle heading toward the black site that they believed held David and the other prisoners. "First time up front, Sister?" He was seated in the co-pilot's seat.

"Yes, Colonel. I've only flown in these in the back."

"You know, you don't serve under me, so you can call me Calvin. My friends call me Cal for short, if you'd prefer."

Simone smiled. "Thank you, Cal," she said, testing out the nickname.

"See, not that hard."

"Assault Shuttles two and three breaking formation to engage guard towers and marked targets," the nun piloting the shuttle announced.

"Now it gets real." Calvin pulled up the tactical overlay on the cockpit screen. They both watched it intently as multiple targets that had been predesignated blinked out, indicating hard kills. "That should even up the odds a bit."

"It's still going to be challenging to take the facility. Especially with our diminished force."

"Getting cold feet?"

"No, Cal. I'm just turning into a bit of a realist."

“Well, maybe right makes might instead of the other way around.”

“That would be nice,” Simone said with a trace of a smile.

“We’re agreed the gloves are off for this mission, right?”

Simone nodded with a sideways look. “Yes.”

“No backing out, Sister. We go in hard—no stun rounds. The people here don’t deserve mercy, and we don’t have time to be nice. Our only advantage is the element of surprise, and we’ve got to punch them in the face, to begin with… then never take our foot off their collective throats.”

“Are you always this cold toward the enemy?”

Calvin turned away from the tactical overlay to look her in the eye. “Always. I’m not here to ruminate on the rights and wrongs of conflict. I’ve got a job, and that job is to put down the enemy before they kill me, and more importantly, my friends and fellow soldiers.”

Simone was silent as the shuttle loitered just outside of weapons range, waiting for its consorts to finish off the fixed defenses they had marked from drone overflights. The pilot looked over at both of them. “Sister Darzi, shuttles two and three are reporting all targets down. We’re ready to land.”

“You ready, Sister?” Calvin asked, all business.

“If I was completely truthful? No. But sometimes you have to force yourself to go.”

“That’s the spirit; let’s get in there and get our people.”

Simone cued the commlink to the group of shuttles. “This is Sister Darzi. Commence landing and attack all enemy forces! Push into the facility as quickly as possible; remember not to get bogged down in clearing each room, but bottle up enemy forces and press on. Our objective is the sub-basement levels where they hold political and military prisoners. May God go with us!”

“Brace yourselves,” the pilot said, directing her comment mostly at Simone, who was in the jump seat and not fully

strapped in.

“Hoorah, Sister!” Calvin said.

From his vantage point in the cockpit, Calvin watched as he had through countless combat insertions throughout his career as the shuttle quickly accelerated to provide as small a window for targeting by enemy anti-air weapons as possible, then hovered and dropped out of the sky with a bone-jarring thud.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Calvin shouted, jumping out of the seat and storming through the hatch to the cargo area where the rest of the volunteers were strapped in. The restraints snapped up as he stepped through, with Simone close on his heels.

“I’m not used to doing things like this,” Calvin began. “We’ve got a motley crew here made up of nuns, former military from this planet, and civilians who I normally wouldn’t give a second look. But today is a day we do things differently. We’re going into this facility, we’re rescuing our friends, we’re putting the hurt on the Leaguer bastards that have tortured and hurt them, and then we’re going home. You with me?”

The nuns and volunteers roared their agreement, causing Calvin to smile. “Now that almost sounds like my beloved Terran Coalition Marine Corps. They say being attacked by the TCMC is like being hit by the wrath of God. Let’s show these Leaguer bastards what that looks like! Move out! Let’s go!” he shouted, voice rasping like an old-school drill instructor.

Calvin charged out of the cargo area of the shuttle as soon as the ramp hit the gravel, followed closely by the entire contents of the shuttle; twenty-one more battle-rifle-carrying combatants. The two other shuttles had landed close by; they also discharged their passengers before all three lifted off. As that happened, he took stock of the

battlefield and identified hardpoints had been destroyed, but enemy troops were massing near the entrance to the facility.

"Sisters, at 'em!" Calvin yelled into his open commlink. "All squads forward! Our target is that building entrance! Light them up!"

While he ran, Calvin fired his battle rifle at the troops that were congregated around the entrance, felling several; the well-trained sisters joined in, dropping more and causing them to take cover. "Grenades!" he ordered, lifting his battle rifle and triggering the underslung grenade launcher. Several other nuns did so as well, and the enemy troops that thought they were safely in cover were suddenly hit with fragmentation grenades exploding behind them.

Momentum in combat is such a fickle thing, Calvin considered briefly as he charged across the field at an all-out run. The Monrovians, shocked by the death and destruction caused by the grenades, began to desert the battle line they'd formed and ran back into the facility. As soon as that happened, he knew they had them. He jumped over the first barricade using the assist of his power armor and landed on the other side, discharging his battle rifle at point-blank range into the chest of two unlucky Monrovian soldiers.

Other sisters and some of the braver civilians jumped the makeshift strongpoint as well, causing a mass melee to break out. Before long, Calvin had dropped his battle rifle in its one-point sling and drawn his sidearm, systematically taking down enemy combatants at close range. Looking to his right, he saw the wounded nun from before, with her arm in a sling, doing the same thing. Chuckling to himself as he ran out of ammunition, he used his sidearm as a club, knocking Monrovians out with a direct bash to the head.

As the last few scampered away, Simone appeared at his side. "Not bad for an old guy, Colonel."

“Who the heck are you calling old, young whippersnapper?” Calvin retorted good-naturedly.

“We only took a couple of casualties taking this position. One fatality. I suppose I should be grateful that the cost thus far is light.”

“We’ll worry about it after we finish the fight. Get some explosives up here and blow the damn door. If they get too much time to regroup, this will be far costlier than it ought to be.”

“Yes, Colonel!” Simone said crisply while turning to look for the nun that had experience with door breaches.

Calvin reloaded his battle rifle and sidearm, preparing for the next wave. *We might pull this half-assed op off.*

32

THOUSANDS OF KILOMETERS AWAY, Amir rolled his fighter and pulled back hard on his flight stick, trying to throw off pursuing missiles and enemy craft. They had successfully evaded the first wave of enemy SAMs, but now there were more aircraft in the fray. Twelve League fighters were now in the air and were charging toward his formation.

"Sister Arendse," Amir said into the private commlink reserved for the two of them. "I believe we have no choice but to jettison our bombs and focus on the air-to-air fight."

"But we'll be overrun if that happens," Arendse insisted. "Someone has to bomb those fighters out of existence."

"We'll have to strafe them, then. But only after we deal with the enemy in front of us."

There was a pregnant pause on the commlink. "Some of us could lead a suicide attack. Come in at a high angle of attack, drop the bombs, and well... who cares if we survive or not."

"No, we all try to come out of this alive. To do anything else is wrong."

"I'll follow your lead, for now, Colonel. I'm not allowing these evil doers to kill my sisters. Whatever it takes to stop them."

“Trust in Allah and his will,” Amir said as he cut over to the primary squadron channel. “Christus flight, jettison all bombs! Configure to air-to-air focus!”

“Confirm that order, Colonel,” one of the sisters replied.

“I say again, jettison all bombs and prepare for air-to-air combat!” Amir barked, brooking no discussion.

Acknowledgments lit up his squadron communications board, with all ten fighters signaling green. Amir cued up the command to drop his bombs without arming them; as soon as they left the pylons, his craft was instantly far more maneuverable and agile. Calling up his air-to-air tactical overlay on the HUD, he noted that the enemy fighters were three hundred kilometers away and on a direct intercept course. “Tally ho!” Amir called into the comm. “Twelve bandits, two o’clock! Range, three hundred kilometers. Stand by for maximum BVR missile launch! Weapons free!” BVR stood for Beyond Visual Range.

The flight of ten Phantoms angled to the right, shifting their heading to point straight on at the closing League fighters. The missile tone sounded in Amir’s cockpit, the advanced LIDAR targeting system achieving a lock. “Christus One, Fox three!”

“Christus Two, Fox three!”

“Christus Seven, Fox three!”

The other pilots called launches, and Amir tracked the inbound missiles through his HUD. A few seconds later, he observed enemy missiles launching. “Christus flight, take evasive action. Inbound air-to-air missiles.”

Pulling back hard on the flight stick, Amir headed up and dropped chaff behind him. His three wingmen did the same, following in close formation. The other two groups of three fighters scattered off on different headings, doing their best to confuse the enemy threat. He watched as their salvo of missiles mostly hit chaff jettisoned by the League pilots or

was spoofed by ECM. Still, two League icons blinked out of existence.

Amir tracked the incoming missiles and was gratified that superior Terran Coalition ECM spoofed the ones headed toward his element; one of his other squads wasn't so lucky. The most damaged fighter couldn't jink and maneuver like the others, and it was bracketed by two League missiles, erasing it from existence. He winced, aware the sister who piloted it went into combat knowing she was in a limited craft but had never wavered. *Real courage*.

"Christus flight, we're at a disadvantage in BVR combat. Follow me in; we're going to close in and engage them close up," Amir said.

"You're using the same tactics the Monrovians used on us," Arendse commented on their private channel.

"Correct, Sister. It's the right move given our situation."

"And then?"

"Once we've defeated this group of fighters, we'll try to engage the remaining craft on the ground before they can launch."

"That's a long shot, Colonel."

"I know," Amir replied, not feeling very good about their odds himself.

WHILE THE DOGFIGHT CONTINUED, Ruth monitored the situation from the bridge of the *Lion of Judah*. They had established the location of the two bases on the ground that had League fighters stationed at them and were actively monitoring the airspace. She called back to Aibek, "Conn, TAO! Confirm twelve League fighters have appeared on our screens and are engaging friendly contacts."

"Acknowledged, TAO."

“Sir, I believe the friendly forces were trying to take out the enemy craft on the ground.”

“Did they succeed?” Aibek asked.

“Negative, sir. They were unable to engage before being attacked by airborne League assets and surface-to-air missile systems that appear to be the latest and greatest in the League’s arsenal.”

“We don’t know that they’re League assets, Lieutenant. They could have Monrovian pilots.”

Ruth turned around in her chair and stared at Aibek. “With respect, sir, there’s little chance green pilots are performing the kind of maneuvers I’m seeing. They’re up against expert-level combatants. Same goes for those SAMs.”

“Even if that’s accurate, what does it change?”

“If they’re actual League assets, we have the authority to engage.”

“I’m under specific orders not to engage any target on Monrovia, Lieutenant,” Aibek responded.

Ruth realized that the bridge had become very quiet. Open discussion of this nature didn’t happen on a CDF ship. “Sir, they’ve got another fifty or so sixth generation fighters down there. Once they start getting them into the air, Colonel Amir won’t have a chance.”

“Do we have a fix on the exact location of the League fighters and sensor systems for the SAMs?”

“Yes, sir. They’re parked out in the open. I have them down to the centimeter.”

Ruth wondered what was going through Aibek’s mind; his facial expression was harsh with his eyes narrowed, and his mouth tight. “Neutron cannons?” he asked in an open-ended manner.

“They’d be our most effective weapon, sir. Missiles would destroy far too much area around the planes, as would mag-

cannon rounds. Energy weapons would be the weapon of choice."

There was a multiple-second pause as Aibek just sat there; Ruth could almost see the tug-of-war going on in his mind. Finally, he punched a button on the CO's chair that engaged the built-in microphone. "Attention, all hands, this is your XO. General Quarters! General Quarters! All hands, man your battle stations! I say again, man your battle stations! Set condition one throughout the ship! This is not a drill!"

As he spoke, Ruth swiveled around in her chair and punched in the commands to engage condition one; the lights on the bridge switched to a deep blue color that allowed them to see console readouts better.

"TAO, get me a firing solution on the League fighters and SAMs. All of them."

"Conn, TAO, acquiring firing solutions, sir."

It took Ruth a few minutes; she had to plot an individual solution for each fighter in order to ensure hitting all of the targets. "Conn, TAO, firing solutions confirmed."

"TAO, firing point procedures, neutron cannons, League fighters, and SAMs."

"Conn, TAO, ready to engage, sir," Ruth answered back forcefully.

"TAO, match bearings, shoot, neutron cannons!"

Ruth triggered the firing sequence, and the *Lion*'s neutron cannon emitters roared to life. Potent beams of blue energy issued from the ship, each strike erasing a fighter or SAM missile pod from existence. It took twenty seconds to cycle through the entire list of targets, but when they finished, no active enemy contacts remained.

"Conn, TAO, enemy targets neutralized."

"Good shooting, Lieutenant," Aibek replied. "Status of the air-to-air engagement?"

“Amir’s flight has splashed four bandits while taking one loss. They’re continuing to engage.”

“Continue to monitor the situation.”

“Yes, sir,” Ruth replied, watching her tactical screen like a hawk.

33

"Colonel! Did you see that? Weapons fire from space!" Arendse shouted into her commlink, professionalism giving way to joy.

"Christus One, guns, guns, guns!" Amir called out, squeezing the trigger to fire his miniature neutron cannons; a moment later, the League fighter he was chasing exploded, raining debris over the battlefield.

"I did indeed, Sister! I'm unaware of any friendlies on station. Does your order have some friends we weren't made aware of?"

"Not that know of, Colonel. My onboard computer classified those as ship-based neutron cannon strikes. Not from something small either. The impacts were heavy cruiser or better strength."

"I wonder..." Amir said, his voice trailing off. He switched to the commlink to the spacecraft emergency frequency, known among pilots as the Guard frequency. "This is Lieutenant Colonel Amir to any friendly CDF forces. Do you read me, over?"

"Colonel? Is that you? This is Lieutenant Taylor."

"By Allah, it's so good to hear your voice, Lieutenant," Amir replied, momentarily overcome by emotion. "I wasn't

sure how we were getting out of this alive."

"Do you guys need more help? Colonel Aibek has alert fighters warming up, and we're preparing pararescue support if you need it."

"We've eliminated all but two enemy craft. I believe we can finish them off and return to base. I'll defer on the reinforcements. I know Colonel Cohen wants to avoid direct CDF involvement if at all possible."

"Understood, Colonel. How's everyone else? We're pretty worried about Colonel Cohen up here."

"Colonel Demood and some of the sisters are attempting to rescue him. How they're faring, I don't know."

"Can you switch to a secure channel?"

"Negative, Lieutenant. We zeroed all crypto keys out when we transferred these birds to the sisters," Amir replied with some irritation. That oversight was hurting them now.

"Okay, sir. We'll stand by. Colonel Aibek asked me to wish you good luck and Godspeed."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Pass back that we're very thankful for the help. *Insha'Allah!*" Amir replied, then mentally turned his commlink back to the private channel with Arendse. "The assist came from the *Lion of Judah*," he announced.

"She's back in orbit? What about additional reinforcements?"

"Unlikely. Orders were direct from Colonel Cohen that the ship wasn't to get involved. I would be reasonably certain that eradicating those fighters broke standing orders… not that you will find me complaining."

"So, what now?"

Inside of his flight helmet, Amir's face broke into a fierce grin. "Now, Sister, we finish off the enemy!"

Kaufman adjusted her helmet and reset the HUD. It had been causing her problems for days, but there wasn't enough time for the sisters that kept up their armor to attempt a repair. The limited cycles they had were spent on patching power armor and making mission-critical fixes. *There's not enough time left to fix my silly HUD.* She smacked the side of it. A moment later, the HUD reengaged.

"Colonel Amir to Alpha leader," Amir's voice registered through the commlink in Kaufman's headset.

"This is Alpha leader, go ahead," Kaufman promptly replied.

"Sister Kaufman, enemy air is gone. You are clear to proceed without fear of air-to-air interception."

"Very good. Do you have any munitions left for close support?"

"Negative, Sister. All friendlies are Winchester, excepting energy weapons. We can strafe ground targets but lack any bombs or missiles."

"Understood. Please stay on station as long as possible," Kaufman said.

"Of course, Sister. Amir out."

Kaufman keyed her commlink to the command channel. "Mother Superior, can you hear me?"

"Yes, child," Sarno's voice said, loud and true.

"If we're going to attack, now is the time. We won't have the benefit of air support, but there's no enemy air to speak of either."

"The odds will be even?"

Kaufman smiled to herself. "We're the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense. The odds are always in our favor, because God's on our side."

The sound of polite chuckling echoed through the open commlink. "I have just received information that our social media targeting was successful. Mass protests have broken

out across the planet, just as we had planned. Proceed with the attack, and we'll carry the day," Sarno replied.

"Yes, Mother Superior," Kaufman replied. She sucked in a deep breath. "First battalion combat team, execute, execute, execute! Assault company, follow my shuttle in. The first objective is the roof!" Switching the commlink off for a moment, she leaned over to the pilot of her shuttle. "'Take us in. I want to put the first boots down on this God forsaken building."

"Yes, Sister!"

The shuttle pitched down while accelerating forward in a full power dive. Through the forward transparent metal windscreen, the clouds whipped by and were suddenly replaced by a view of the ground as they cleared the cloud layer. The air space around the shuttle was filled with dozens of other shuttles in a similar high-speed approach. Surface-to-air missiles were volleyed toward the shuttles, only to harmlessly explode thanks to ECM pods that had been mounted to the craft. Utilizing their internal mounted rockets, Kaufman watched as return fire thundered out and erased many of the Monrovian defensive positions.

The ground rushed up at the windscreen as the shuttle leveled out its flight; within fifteen seconds, it hovered to a stop over one of several parapets that lined the roof of the central government complex building that was their target. Kaufman slapped the pilot on the shoulder and vaulted out of the cockpit, landing on the cargo floor. "Let's go, Sisters!" she shouted at the top of her lungs while simultaneously triggering the manual rear ramp control. The rest of the nuns disengaged themselves from the harnesses that held them in place and seized their battle rifles. A few seconds later when the ramp was entirely down, she led the charge.

Kaufman landed on her feet, thanks to her power armor, while her compatriots thudded onto the roof directly behind

her. “Squad one, secure the nearest roof access point. Squad two, secure the LZ,” she shouted as she moved up quickly toward the door that led into the complex, battle rifle up and aimed. Her platoon was barely out of the shuttle when the door burst open, and enemy soldiers streamed out.

Kaufman put a burst of stun rounds into the first soldier in her sights, and the squad she’d assigned to cover the door formed a firing line, and they shot down close to twenty soldiers before they quit emerging. “This is Sister Kaufman. I need two more platoons on my position, now,” she shouted into her commlink.

Not waiting for a response, she moved forward toward the door when power-armored Monrovians stepped out, firing on full automatic from weapons she instantly identified as League of Sol issued battle rifles. *The report of that weapon is etched into my mind for as long as I draw breath in this universe.* “Take cover, Sisters!”

Many stun rounds smacked into the power-armored Monrovian but had no effect. Two nuns dropped as the entire squad made a mad dash to a line of air-conditioning units that sat in the middle of the roof. All the while, more power-armored Monrovians came out of the doorway. “Switch to armor-piercing rounds, and aim for center mass,” Kaufman commanded.

The nuns around her dropped the magazines from their rifles and reloaded with lethal bullets, while the squad that had been providing flanking cover reformed behind the same air-conditioning units. Kaufman paused to catch her breath, poking her head out long enough to view the enemy forces; nine soldiers in power armor. “Sisters, on my order, deploy from cover and eliminate the enemy!”

Counting down from three mentally, Kaufman braced herself. “Go, go, go!” she shouted at the top of her lungs while rising from a crouch, battle rifle steadied against the

top of the metal housing. Drawing a bead on the nearest Monrovian to her, she fired a three-round burst directly into the center mass of the power-armored soldier. Superior CDF bullets sliced through the League power armor like a hot knife through butter. The breastplate collapsed, and the blood was visible even from ten meters away as the man collapsed in a heap. The other nuns opened up on the rest of the enemy force, felling all eight remaining men, but not before two more sisters were killed.

Kaufman didn't have time to grieve or even acknowledge the losses as more Monrovians came out of the door. *I'll give this to them; they're persistent*. While three more power-armored soldiers emerged and engaged the nuns, a fourth stepped halfway out of the doorway as he raised a man-portable missile launcher to his shoulder. She immediately prioritized him above all other combatants, knowing that more shuttles were inbound. "SAM! Take out the one with the SAM," she shouted while holding down the trigger of her battle rifle. The rest of her firing line joined in, and the hapless enemy stumbled as bullets slammed into his armor. At some point during the fusillade, he fell backward and accidentally triggered the firing sequence for the missile.

Kaufman stared as the scene in front of her seemed to grind to a halt and entered slow motion. The missile launcher had ended up pointed at the doorway behind him and blew out of its launching tube, flying less than two meters before slamming into the plasticrete stairwell entry point. An enormous explosion occurred as the warhead detonated and incinerated the body of the soldier who had carried it, along with the rest of the Monrovians near him.

One of the younger nuns near Kaufman glanced over at her. "That was one heck of a shot, Sister."

Kaufman, in turn, made the sign of the cross. "Remember its cost," she said, standing up. "Close in and secure that

access point, Sisters! We're taking this building and holding its occupants to account for the evil they have committed against their citizens and God himself!"

A ragged cheer went up from the remaining nuns, and they rushed forward. Kaufman noted with satisfaction and pride that despite the losses suffered, they were fighting as hard as anyone could ask. The roar of another shuttle assuming a hover position announced the arrival of reinforcements, and she walked across the roof to personally assess the stairwell. Peering down, she could see more Monrovians amassing at its base, what had to be ten to fifteen stories down.

"All right, Sisters, the good news is we own the high ground. The bad news is the enemy has great strength below us. We're going to charge down into that mess and take the fight to them. Who's with me?"

"We are!" the entire unit of nuns shouted as one with voices so loud, they could seemingly wake the dead.

"Follow me," Kaufman shouted in reply before turning around and heading back into the stairwell.

ATTWOOD BARELY DODGED a piece of the ceiling as it fell to the floor in front of him. For what seemed like an eternity, the sisters had been bombarding their exterior security perimeter, and the sounds of battle raged. The guard in front of him that was trying to escort him safely to a safe room wasn't so lucky; the man was caught in the head by a large piece of marble ceiling. Looking down at his lifeless body, Attwood pondered the cost of the entire conflict. *We're in the wrong here, we always were. Now we're paying for our crimes. Either I can do something about it, or I can keep hiding and die for nothing*. Shell-shocked as he took in the sight of civilians

fleeing for their lives, screaming as they went, he reached down and picked up the fallen officer's sidearm, and turned around—heading further into the complex and toward the command and control center for the Monrovian military.

Struggling to remember the way, he found his destination thanks to the military police standing guard outside. "Halt!" a smartly dressed young soldier said.

Attwood quickly showed his hands. "I'm Deputy Prime Minister Martin Attwood, Private. Please, I need to get into the command center."

The young man recognized Attwood and stood aside. "Of course, sir. Where's your security detail, sir?"

Attwood shook his head. "They didn't make it."

The soldier looked troubled as Attwood put his palm down on the scanner and the door swung open after the system accepted his identity. Walking through the doorway, he took in the scene of chaos before him. Military officers stood behind their stations, watching video feeds and computer displays. Orders were shouted into the communications systems, and judging by what he could make out on the command and control plot shown on a large screen in the middle of the room, the National Guard was being pushed back at all points of engagement.

"Deputy Prime Minister, we're a bit busy here," the deep voice of the general that was promoted to lead the Monrovian military after Monahan had shown his true colors intoned.

"I'll only take a few minutes of your time, General Shriver."

"What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what the situation is," Attwood replied. Before the general could respond, he added, "The real situation. Not the one sugar-coated for Fitzroy."

Shriver's mask of control seemed to fade away as he looked at Attwood. "We lost our air assets fifteen minutes ago. The CSV *Lion of Judah* is in orbit, and she took out every League 6th generation fighter we had on both bases. The enemy fighter craft eliminated the few we had in the air. They now have complete air supremacy over our capital. Sending our outdated interceptors at them would be nothing more than suicide for the pilots."

"I suppose that explains the frontal attack on government central."

"Yes. With direct air support, they've been able to land troops all over the complex. They know exactly what they're doing, Mr. Attwood. Coupled with the mass protests occurring all over our major cities that have divided our forces and prevent us from bringing in significant reinforcements without causing massive civilian casualties… I give us another two hours of resistance before they kill or neutralize everyone in their way."

"Do we have any military options left?"

"Aside from wholesale slaughter of citizens, dropping strategic weapons on our cities, or receiving reinforcements from the League of Sol… no."

"Then what are we still doing here?"

"Prime Minister Fitzroy told us to fight. That's all we can do."

This is either going to be like a lightbulb going on in their heads, or I'm going to get shot. "What if the prime minister… was no longer the prime minister?"

Shriver stopped and turned to face Attwood, looking him square in the eyes. "Are you proposing a coup?"

"I'm proposing that we remove the prime minister from her post for gross dereliction of duty. I've spoken to the shadow ministers, the backbenchers, and most of the major

portfolio ministers. All agree that decisive action must be taken now." *That's not exactly true, but it sounds good.*

"If you have the political leaders behind you, why do you need the military?"

"Because Fitzroy has drawn her power from the military for the last year. Without your express support, she won't see reason and step aside."

"What's your plan?" Shriver asked bluntly.

"You come with me, along with a few soldiers. I will try to get some MMPs," he began, using the acronym for Member of Monrovian Parliament, "who haven't fled or been otherwise incapacitated yet, to join us. We will all enter together, and I will persuade her to resign for the good of the planet. Then we announce an unconditional surrender to the sisters and negotiate a peace."

Attwood watched as he could almost see the gears in Shriver's head turning. *This guy is far too transparent to ever play poker*, he thought. Finally, the general spoke. "Do you realize what you're suggesting could be construed as treason and get us all shot?"

"Throwing our soldiers at an enemy they can't defeat is unconscionable. Not to mention, we're on the wrong side of this, morally," Attwood replied. Several people in the room stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him. *I hope that's the realization in them that someone in power believes what many of us know to be true.*

"Okay, Deputy Prime Minister Attwood," Shriver said, as if reciting his title would make what they were planning okay. "You've got the backing of the Monrovian National Guard. Major Jefferson!"

"Yes, sir!" a dark-skinned, pudgy man shouted from across the room.

"Assemble a tactical team. We're shipping out with Mr. Attwood."

34

Bullets whipped around Sarno's power armor as she and several nuns that made up her headquarters element made their way toward Kaufman's assault squad. She had made it clear that she didn't want her Mother Superior in harm's way, but Sarno would have none of it. The battle had raged around them for the better part of an hour, with the nuns making steady progress. Eventually, though, they came up against heavily entrenched Monrovian positions that refused to retreat.

"We're taking significant casualties, Mother Superior," Kaufman said, stepping back from the firing line. "Over two hundred sisters have fallen in battle so far."

Sarno frowned inside of her helmet. "Such loss of life is a tragedy."

"The Monrovians are using armor-piercing ammunition of League manufacture. It's punching through our power armor if it hits head on."

"We'll have to increase the lethality of our actions," Sarno concluded.

"I agree. I wish you would retire to the rear, Mother Superior. You'll do no good for the order if you perish."

“If it’s my time to go, child, then it’s my time. When I was in the TCMC, I detested officers who led from behind and seemingly never exposed themselves to hostile forces. I’d be a hypocrite if I did the same thing now.”

Kaufman shook her head and smiled. “You’re one stubborn woman.”

“Takes one to know one, Sister Kaufman.”

Sarno walked over to the mobile ammunition dump they’d brought with them; also included were some cargo containers that held other weapons. She punched in her access code, opened one, and hefted a grenade launcher. “Sister Kaufman, authorize the use of fragmentation and plasma grenades by sisters that are pinned down. The enemy strongpoint in front of us; what’s its makeup?”

“They’ve got several squad automatic weapons in there, and a 40mm cannon on a tripod that’s already taken out three power-armored sisters. We’re exchanging long-range fire with them, as a frontal assault seemed likely to produce significant losses on our side,” Kaufman replied.

“Deploy two grenade launchers. I’ll personally lead this assault.”

Kaufman popped up the faceplate of her helmet so that her facial expression was visible; blood red and her eyes flashing. “Mother Superior, you can’t risk your life here! We will carry the day, but our order must retain its leader.”

“Child, I understand your feelings. The order is greater than any single nun. It is greater than me. There was a leader before me, and there’ll be one after me. Most likely you someday. Today, I insist on doing my part and being at the front.”

“Yes, Mother Superior,” Kaufman replied, clearly forcing down her own emotions.

Sarno picked up a large mini-gun from the open cargo container. “I believe this will do nicely.” She locked the

weapon into her power-armored suit as it was designed to be mounted on shuttles, or a fully power-armor encased soldier, seeing as it weighed over two hundred kilograms. Triggering the button to spin up the barrel, she confirmed it was in good working order.

Kaufman passed the grenade launchers out to two other power-armored sisters, who loaded them with high explosive grenades while Sarno crouched behind the makeshift barricade they'd erected.

"Sisters," Sarno shouted through the local commlink, gaining everyone's attention. "The people we are fighting know that they're on the wrong side of history. Some may fervently believe in their cause, but their number is few. If we can shatter them here and gain entrance to this most protected of buildings that house their leaders, we'll prevail in one fell swoop. Stand behind me and press forward, no matter the cost!"

With a rousing shout, the nuns, led by Sarno and Kaufman, charged over the barricade, firing on full automatic from their battle rifles.

Sarno's mini-gun spun up, and she unleashed a withering barrage of projectiles down the hallway, sweeping aside soldiers, desks, and tables they had hurriedly thrown up for protection, and blasting the power-armored soldier that operated his heavy weapon from the cannon's perch.

"Press forward!" Kaufman shouted, putting well-placed three-round bursts on target and felling multiple Monrovians.

"Stop for nothing, Sisters!" Sarno shouted into her commlink.

The Monrovians, shocked by the appearance of heavy weapons and grenades exploding around them, first began to fall back in good order and then gave way to a rout. Men and women tossed aside their guns and ran away as fast as their

feet would carry them, some with their hands raised, others merely running for their lives.

"We've got them on the run, Mother Superior," Kaufman said excitedly, the infectious feeling of victory close at hand. "Now please allow us to finish this. Stay here with the HQ unit, and we'll update you on our progress."

The other nuns around them began to chant, "Mother Superior to the rear! Mother Superior to the rear!"

Giving in to their pleadings, Sarno raised her hand in defeat. "I'll remain here. But you must now press the advantage. We've broken them in this sector. Push forward and consolidate our gains before they regroup! Onward, Sisters!"

THE FOUR PROTECTIVE service agents that guarded the prime minister's office stood as a human shield in front of the door, guns raised and aimed at the contingent of Monrovian troops led by General Shriver and Attwood. Attwood was inwardly shaking in his boots; chatter over the commlinks as they made their way through the government complex told them that the sisters had gained the advantage and were pressing forward on all fronts.

"Gentlemen, please step aside," Attwood said from behind the soldiers.

"Prime Minister Fitzroy has ordered us not to admit anyone, Mister Attwood. I'm sorry, but you must turn back. We'll use whatever force is required to defend the prime minister," the agent who Attwood assumed was in charge stated.

"There's no reason for more bloodshed here. Most of the parliament is in favor of removing the prime minister, and we're engaged in a war we can't win. Please, step aside and

let us try to reason with her. I don't know about you, but I don't want to die today."

The agents exchanged glances with one another. "That's the deputy PM and the general in charge of the National Guard. Who are we to tell them they can't go in?" one of the agents said to the one in charge.

"We swore an oath to protect the prime minister," he insisted.

"You swore an oath to protect the office of the prime minister, actually," Attwood replied, finding confidence from some well deep within himself. "Colleen Fitzroy happens to occupy that office for the moment. Once we speak with her, she will no longer. Your duty is to the constitution and the people of Monrovia. For the last time, step aside."

The agents again looked at one another, but this time, two of them lowered their weapons, holstered them, and stepped out of the way. The lead agent, swearing under his breath, slowly lowered his firearm. "Fine. We couldn't have stopped you anyway," he said, as if justifying his actions.

The soldiers quickly manhandled them out of the way, and Attwood rapped on the door to the inner office. "Prime Minister!" he shouted through the door. "We know you're in there! Open the door!"

"Blow the door," Shriver interjected. "We don't have time for this."

Attwood scurried out of the way as a tall female soldier unwrapped a strip of detcord and affixed it to the door frame. They stepped back, and she shouted, "Fire in the hole!" A moment later, the explosive rope detonated with a loud thud; the door fell in a cloud of smoke.

General Shriver was the first one through the smoking doorframe, followed slowly by several soldiers and Attwood. Fitzroy stood defiantly behind her desk, her face smeared

with soot, and a pistol in her hands, held in a shooter's stance. "Not one more step, you traitors!"

"Colleen, let's be reasonable about this," Attwood said.

"You little weasel," Fitzroy shouted. "You stabbed me in the back while an invader is overthrowing our government! I should have you all killed."

"Put down the gun, Madam Prime Minister," Attwood said, trying out a more formal tone. "There's no need for more bloodshed today. Parliament no longer has confidence in your ability to discharge your office. Nor do I. For the betterment of our people, you must step down. Do it now of your own accord, and you can be remembered for making a noble sacrifice."

"Marty, you're so full of it. I know what's going on here; you're going to make me a scapegoat. You'll tell them all it was my idea, and let the sisters hang me. I go down, you're all going down with me."

"I've accepted that I'm... going down, as you put it, Colleen. I should've done something sooner. I should've manned up sooner, regardless of the cost to my fortunes. I'll go to my grave with that regret."

"General Shriver, I am ordering you to arrest the deputy prime minister," Fitzroy yelled angrily.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't obey your order as I don't find it lawful. The deputy prime minister is right. This must stop. My men and women are dying by the hundreds to defend this complex in a hopeless defense. We'll soon be overrun. I'm going to act to save as many lives as we can. The sisters have promised to treat anyone who surrenders with dignity, according to the Terran Coalition rules of warfare. Please put your weapon down and put your hands in the air."

"Oh, screw all of you," Fitzroy replied as she put the gun under her chin.

“No, Colleen!” Attwood shouted at the top of his lungs as she pulled the trigger. He closed his eyes and turned away, not wanting to see what happened. When he looked again, she had collapsed in a heap, and there was a large blood stain on the wall, directly behind where she had been standing. He staggered over to where she lay and looked down at the body. “Damnit, Colleen, there was a better way.”

Shriver walked up behind Attwood and put his hand on his shoulder. “We’ve got a job to do, Prime Minister,” he said. “There’s time to grieve later.”

Attwood nodded as he stood up. “Do you have your command authorization codes on you?”

“Yes, sir,” Shriver replied.

Attwood stepped over Fitzroy’s body and behind the desk, accessing the computer terminal sitting atop it. He biometrically logged in to the primary system and selected the emergency override system for national emergencies. The system allowed the prime minister to communicate with any electronic device, computer, tablet, commlink, or vidlink on the planet and overrode any other communication in progress. After entering his credentials into the application, it prompted for a counter-authentication from a high-level military officer. “Please enter your authorization code, General,” Attwood said, gesturing to the screen.

Shriver leaned over and typed in a long alpha-numeric string, and finished by pressing the enter key. A few seconds later, the system’s broadcast control screen popped up, and Attwood sat in the center of the field observed by the built-in camera on the monitor. He then pressed the button to begin transmitting.

“My fellow citizens, this is acting Prime Minister Martin Attwood. I come to you this afternoon from our main governmental complex, which as most of you may know, is under siege by the same force that invaded our planet several

days ago. This message is intended not only for our citizens but for the leaders of this force, the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense. The Monrovian National Guard is in an untenable situation. We are fighting a losing battle against a superior enemy, and an enemy, I am ashamed to say, is in the right. For the last nine months, our government has engaged in a campaign to rid our planet of people who profess a belief in a higher power. We have betrayed our ideals and became the monsters we left Earth to escape. I stand before you today, guilty as charged by the Little Sisters. At this point, there is only one logical course of action left to us, and that is unconditional surrender. I now call on all members of the Monrovian National Guard to cease fire and lay down your weapons. In exchange, I ask that the Little Sisters treat our prisoners with respect and dignity and cease all active combat actions. I also invite the leadership of their order, as well as the CDF personnel on our planet, to meet with me as soon as possible to discuss further terms. To any armed citizens that would continue to resist… I ask you also to lay down your arms. Further combat is futile, we will not win, and further loss of life beyond all of the souls that have already perished would be needlessly tragic."

Attwood closed his eyes for a moment, then resumed his monologue. "We must hold ourselves accountable for what has happened on this world. That collectively goes for all of us, and it starts with me. For now, stay in your homes and await further instructions. This is acting Prime Minister Martin Attwood, signing off."

Attwood flipped off the system, leaving the screen blank. Shriver looked down at him. "Now what, sir?"

"Now, we wait. I would expect we'll be hearing from the nuns quite soon."

35

CALVIN SENT a burst of rifle fire down a corridor in the third level basement of the black site, felling another guard, of which there always seemed to be another jumping out to shoot at them. *Where are they getting all this manpower?* "Clear!" *Maybe it's because we keep stunning people and not putting them down for good.*

Simone and the group of nuns and civilians with them cautiously moved up, with Calvin taking point. They came to a four-way junction in the corridor that extended for dozens of meters in each direction. "According to the plans, this is where they keep the high-value targets," Simone said, looking down one of the corridors.

"Yeah, but there are dozens of cells. We need to spread out and search them."

As he was talking, yet another group of Monrovian soldiers came into view at the end of one of the corridors, saw them, snapped up their rifles, and started shooting. Bullets slammed into the walls and ceiling around them, and a few shots hit Calvin dead center in his power armor, which thankfully blocked the impacts. He brought up his rifle and sighted down on the enemy, sending three-round bursts in their direction; after two soldiers dropped, the other three

scurried out of the line of fire and kept up blindly shooting at them from the other side of a corner.

Calvin gingerly touched his midsection, the pain of the hits getting the better of him. "I'm getting really tired of these guys."

MEANWHILE, David could hear the sounds of combat from the room he was being "questioned" in. His ears perked up when he heard the unmistakable report of multiple CDF battle rifles. "Looks like your time is up," he said to the interrogator.

That barb got him another wave of pain searing through his body. "I think not, Colonel Cohen. You will be here with me for a long time. Oh, your friends might be trying to storm the building, but I welcome the attempt," the interrogator said with a smile that made David's skin crawl. "That way, I will have additional subjects to talk to. As I've told you, I do enjoy my work."

"You know, you're one sick SOB," David replied, his voice hoarse and broken. Again, pain swept through his body, causing him to shake and go into convulsions.

"Now what can you tell me about the *Lion of Judah* and its propulsion system?"

"It's better than yours." Despite knowing more pain was on the way, David was buoyed by the sounds of fighting and chose to believe that rescue was at hand.

"In ways, I admire you, Colonel Cohen," the interrogator said. "You've proven to be very able to resist questioning, so far. But I promise you, I will continue to wear you down and crush your ability to fight me. Eventually, you'll see the error of your ways and embrace the way of the League."

"I'd rather die."

“I’ll be happy to arrange that at a later time. For now, though, we’ll continue. You need to ask yourself… where is your so-called God now?” the man asked with a nasty grin.

Suddenly, the door to the room blew off its hinges and fell to the ground, while smoke poured in. David saw the interrogator reach for his sidearm, but a three-round burst hit him center mass before it cleared the holster. The man slumped to the ground, moaning. Calvin and Simone appeared at David’s side, while another nun kicked the gun away from the fallen Leaguer.

David coughed while he looked the interrogator in the eyes. “You’ll get to meet Him real soon.”

Calvin shook David’s arm. “You okay, buddy?” Calvin asked.

David nodded his head. “Still here,” he said while gasping for breath. “A bit sore too.”

“Yeah, you look like a few miles of bad road. I think you need a vacation,” Calvin said with levity in his voice.

“This is a pain chair,” Simone interjected, looking over the metal chair David was strapped in to, which was bolted to the floor.

“I’ve heard of those,” Calvin replied, shaking his head. “I’ve also heard the agony they cause is nearly unbearable.”

“Yeah, I can attest to that. It feels like every part of your body is being ripped off,” David said while wheezing. “Think you guys could get me out of this thing?”

Simone retrieved the controller from where it had fallen on the floor and examined the device. “I need the passphrase to unlock it,” she said and looked over at the fallen interrogator.

“I’ll never help you,” he said before the question was asked, blood leaking out of his mouth. “I’d rather die.”

“Screw this,” Calvin said, shoving Simone to one side and pulling out a laser cutter. “Stay real still, Colonel, I’ll have

you out in no time."

"Try not to cut my arms off," David said with a faint smile, trying to stay positive.

Calvin knelt down and very carefully seared the metal bonds that held David in place with the laser; as it moved from arm to arm, then to his legs, the bonds fell away in short order.

"Can you stand?" Calvin asked.

"Maybe," David replied, pushing off and trying to stand up. His first attempt failed, then he tried again and made it. He held on to the chair to keep his balance, as everything was wobbly. Taking a few seconds and steadying himself, he then stood back from the chair. "Not sure how far I can walk."

Calvin drew his sidearm and handed it to David. "I'm sure we're going to run into some opposition on the way out. Though, if you'd like to finish things off in here, we can step out and let you take care of business."

David took the pistol in his right hand and let it fall to his side. *I might get a momentary flush of triumph from shooting this man and watching him die, but I'll remember it the rest of my life and know I did something monstrous*. "No. No extra-judicial punishments today," David replied, then glanced over at the interrogator.

"Don't have the balls to kill me, Colonel Cohen?" the man spat.

David slowly staggered to where he lay, having to rely on Calvin helping him to walk as he did. "No. I'm not going to kill an unarmed man."

"Afraid God will punish you?"

"No... I don't want to fail my creator. He created us with the ability to determine right from wrong. Something might have gone screwy with the League's ability to choose, but not mine."

“I can see it in your eyes, Colonel. You’d love nothing more than to kill me. You hate me.”

David slowly knelt next to the Leaguer. “I don’t hate you. Above all, I pity you. Your entire life is dedicated to violence, torture, killing… you know nothing else. I fight because I have to, because our way of life is something worth defending. You fight because you’re programmed to. When you meet your maker in the next few minutes from those wounds, it’s very probable he’ll cast you out. To me, that’s a fate worse than death.”

The interrogator’s mouth twisted into a snarl. “There is no God. Your victory here is meaningless, and the League will eventually triumph!”

David shrugged. “I don’t think so.”

Simone walked over and knelt beside David; she held a medical diagnostic tool, which she used to scan the wounded man. Calvin snorted from behind them both. “He’s not worth your time, Sister. Let’s get out of here and head back to the shuttles. I just got word on the commlink we rescued two of the nuns. The third one didn’t make it, but we’ve recovered her body.”

Simone glanced up at him. “None of us are worth God’s time, yet He continues to give it to us. Can we do any less to our fellow humans?”

Calvin shook his head. “You’re a better person than I’ll ever be, Sister. I’ll guard the door, so I can resist the temptation to blow this guy’s brains out and call it a day.”

“Your friend is hard,” the Leaguer said, coughing up blood. “I’m surprised to find a few of you that can be strong when required.”

Simone finished with the device and stared into the Leaguer’s eyes. “I’m sorry, there’s nothing more I can do for you. I don’t have the right tools to save your life, though I would in an instant if I could. What I can do is pray for your

soul, so that before death, you might yet be saved. Would you bow your head with me?"

The Leaguer rewarded her words by spitting in her face. "Never." A few seconds later, his breathing slowed and became ragged, then stopped entirely.

David stood up and steadied himself on the wall. "You did everything you could."

"Was it enough?"

"It was by my judgment. But mine isn't what counts in the end," David said with a trace of a smile before doubling over coughing. "I hate to ask, but would you help me up, Sister?"

Simone stood and reached down with her armored gauntlet, effortlessly helping him stand with the assist of her power armor. "No problem, Colonel. I can carry you out if you'd like."

"If it's all the same, I'd like to try to walk out of here. If nothing else, I need to do it so I can say to myself that I triumphed in some way over this place."

Simone nodded her understanding. "I get it." Together, with David limping along, they made it to the door before David looked back. "Let's get out of here. Enough death for one day."

"Those who live by the sword…die by the sword," Simone replied.

"Amen to that," Calvin replied. "Or in our case, die by TCMC battle rifle. Here, let me help too, Colonel. You stay between us; we'll get out you out of here in no time."

"Thanks, Cal," David said in reply, putting his other arm around Calvin's power armor. The three of them made their way down the corridor back toward the elevator to the surface*. I came so close to death here. But my friends came through for me again, one more time. I thank God for them.*

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David had insisted on being hauled into the shuttle's cockpit despite his injuries. Flanked by Simone and the pilot of the craft, with Calvin taking a jump seat, his right leg flared in pain as the G-force from liftoff affected them. Glancing at Simone's blood- and dirt-smeared face, he was moved to speak. "Sister, I must again thank you for saving me."

"We don't leave our own behind," Simone insisted. "There's no way I was abandoning my sisters or you to be tortured by some godless Leaguer."

"Don't go getting all soft on me," Calvin said. "It's hard enough to break in one fleet officer. I just didn't want to have to do it again."

David rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "I see through all that bluster, you know. For what it's worth, I'd come back for you or anyone else that was captured, regardless of the cost."

Calvin pursed his lips together. "I know you would. In the end, we fight for the people next to us."

"Amen," Simone interjected.

"Where is the rest of your army?" David asked, trying to focus on something besides the horror of what he had endured the last thirty-six hours.

“They’re attacking the main Monrovian government complex. The last I heard, we were carrying the day.”

David let his head drop as another wave of pain swept over his body. His head felt like it was ringing inside of a bell, and he focused on just not crying out. “David, are you okay?” Simone asked him, her voice full of concern.

“I’ll be fine.”

The shuttle flight continued, and little was said; sometimes, David reflected, after intense combat, no one wanted to talk. *There is something to just being thankful I’m still alive*. Simone’s ever-chipper voice interrupted his quiet time. “Colonel, Mother Superior wants to talk to you.”

“Could you put her on the speaker? I can’t do a headset at the moment,” David replied, forcing his eyes open as he glanced at Simone.

“Of course,” Simone replied as she reached over and manipulated the communication controls. “I think we’re patched in now.”

“Mother Superior, this is David Cohen. Can you hear me?” David rasped out.

“Yes, I can hear you loud and clear. I’m so glad to hear your voice again. We’re all worried about you,” came the sound of Sarno’s voice through the poor-quality speaker in the shuttle’s cockpit.

“Thanks to the efforts of Sister Darzi and her team, the prisoners are safe and sound. Well, excepting the one that the Leaguers executed. The interrogator is dead, so unfortunately, we can’t put him on trial and then execute him properly,” David said, bitterness and hate swelling to the surface despite his attempts to suppress them. *Any man that would kill an unarmed prisoner, especially a woman, doesn’t deserve to live*, one side of him thought. *Vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I shall repay*, the other side thundered back. *I have to learn better to let it go… it’s just so hard*.

“There has been a development here, Colonel Cohen. I need you to come to the government complex as soon as possible.”

“With respect, Mother Superior, I don’t think I’m any good to you as a combatant right now. I can’t even walk.”

“A few things have changed, child. The acting Monrovian prime minister has surrendered, along with their entire military. We’re mopping up the last diehard holdouts.”

Relief, surprise, and shock coursed through David’s mind as his face morphed from a look of grim determination to his jaw dropping open. “That’s…incredible,” he stammered, not quite able to believe it.

“It’s the will of God,” Sarno replied through the commlink. “I need you to join me in meeting with the acting PM. You are the ranking member of the Coalition Defense Force on site, and by extension, the closest thing to a representative of the Terran Coalition’s government.”

Well, it sounds like a good a reason as any to divert. I can get medical attention later. “We’ll head that way now, Mother Superior.”

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“Do you have medical personnel on site, Mother Superior?” Simone interjected. “Colonel Cohen suffered a significant injury and needs treatment.”

“I’m fine,” David began to protest before Simone shook her head sharply, cutting him off.

“Yes, child. We have a full triage tent, and Dr. Tural is here tending to the most seriously wounded.”

“Thank you, Mother Superior. We will be there shortly.”

The commlink cut off, leaving the shuttle cockpit in silence, at least momentarily until Calvin started in. “Well, I’ll be damned. The little sissies couldn’t handle fighting a real war, so they gave up.”

“They fought against a better-equipped foe for a considerable period of time,” David replied.

“You can’t have any sympathy for them, sir,” Calvin said with a scowl.

“Maybe not sympathy, but I’ll offer some basic battlefield respect to anyone, soldier—civilian, man, or woman—that’s got the guts to pick up a weapon and put themselves in the line of fire. I don’t care how you slice it or what they’re fighting for… that takes some courage.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree, Colonel,” Calvin finally said, his jaw set and voice tight.

“I see where you’re both coming from,” Simone said, causing both men to turn in her direction. “They fight for the wrong reasons, but they do have the guts to fight. I would bet that most of them believe they’re simply defending their planet from an invader. I doubt that it’s widely known what those camps truly were. I can’t believe that most people would choose to do evil in such a horrific manner, or to support it.”

“Don’t buy into that crap, Sister. The average Monrovian soldier might not know exactly what’s going on in those camps, but there’s no way they didn’t know something was wrong. There’s no way the people who’ve reported their friends and coworkers to the secret police don’t know they did something horrible,” Calvin said, his eyes flashing.

“I’m sure they know it’s screwed up, but I suspect most of them are just trying to survive one more day and direct suspicion onto someone else. That’s the horrible end result of totalitarian police states. When they can’t arrest enough people, they manufacture more criminals because they need people to break the law. In that way, the populations can be controlled,” David said quietly.

“It doesn’t absolve them of guilt for what they did,” Calvin insisted. “You said it yourself… just following orders

isn't a defense."

"No, it's not. But don't you ever wonder what would happen if we had been born in the League of Sol? The sad truth is we would have likely grown up to be the very thing we now fight and detest."

Simone nodded her agreement with David, but Calvin seemed all the more annoyed. "That Leaguer get into your head or something, Colonel? The only good Leaguer..." Calvin said.

"...is a dead Leaguer," David finished for him. "Yes, I know that saying. Maybe a brush with death has caused me to examine my motives further, Cal. All I'm saying is we have to be careful not to go around on our high horse judging everybody." *Of course, I did suggest it would be a good idea to execute the interrogator. Emotions around combat are such a fickle thing*. He fought to keep them in check and remain true to his values.

"I think what Colonel Cohen is trying to say," Simone said in a tone that belied her unease at the debate between the two men, "is that when we look at our enemy, we must remember that for the grace of God, there goes us."

David nodded. "That sums it up perfectly, Sister."

"I will never end up like a damn Leaguer," Calvin replied with a dour expression.

"Okay, enough of that," David said. "We're on our way to accept the Monrovians' surrender. For all intents and purposes, we've won. That's something to celebrate, right?"

"Anyone got some whiskey in here?" Calvin asked, breaking into a big smirk. "We need some shots."

Simone rolled her eyes and turned around to stare at her console. "You're quite the character, Colonel Demood."

"What can I say, Marines get the job done. Hoorah!"

David remained silent, instead focusing on the events of the last few days. *For the life of me, I don't understand why a*

dying man would spit in the face of a nun who offered to pray with him. At that point, who cares? It just might give some peace in those final moments. God, I hate this war. Someday, I hope I live long enough to see people across this galaxy stop killing each other, and if we're unable to live in harmony, at least live in peace.

WALKING PAINFULLY WITH A CANE, David moved slowly down the hallway in the Monrovian government building they were headed to the meet now prime minister of the planet, Martin Attwood. Flanked by Mother Superior Sarno and Calvin, David's injuries forced them to keep a slow pace. "I'm sorry I'm holding you all up," David said, annoyed at his frailty.

"I could always get you a wheelchair, Colonel," Calvin said in a joking tone.

"Out of respect to those who truly need that form of transport, I'll walk since I am able. Besides, Dr. Tural said I should walk it off."

"Uh-huh. I don't think Tural would say that. A real Marine Corps doctor? Yeah. He'd prescribe push-ups."

Out of the corner of his left eye, David caught Sarno rolling her eyes; at last, they made it to the richly decorated and ornate wood door to the PM's office. Calvin opened it up, and they saw several sisters guarding the room while a nervous-looking man sat behind the desk. There was a bloodstain on the wall behind him; he wondered what that was all about.

The man behind the desk stood as David walked in. "Colonel Cohen, I presume?"

"Mr. Attwood," David replied as he made his way into the room slowly.

Attwood stood from the desk and met David, holding out his hand.

David stared at the hand for several seconds before shaking it, a solemn expression on his face. “Mother Superior Sarno,” David said, gesturing to Sarno.

Attwood stuck out his hand to her, and they shook as well.

“Colonel Calvin Demood, Terran Coalition Marine Corps,” David said, turning toward Calvin.

When Attwood turned and tried to shake Calvin’s hand, he simply ignored it. After more than a few seconds of awkward pause, Attwood got the hint and walked back behind the desk. “Please sit down and make yourselves comfortable.”

Once Sarno had taken a seat, making sure her long robes were appropriately tucked under her, David sat. Calvin remained standing, looking like a hulking figure who was spoiling for a fight.

“You asked us here under a flag of truce after unconditional surrender, Mr. Attwood. Now…what do you want?” David asked directly.

“I realize you have no reason to trust me, Colonel Cohen. I appreciate that.”

“You appreciate that?” David shot back, his voice still hoarse. “Let me tell you what I appreciate. The last two days, I was tortured in a Monrovian prison facility. I saw a fellow POW shot in the head by a League interrogator, a Leaguer that your government invited here and sanctioned. Before I was captured, I saw the camps where your government tortured and executed God knows how many people,” he said, his voice finding purpose and growing in strength as he continued to speak.

“There’s no apology I can make that is adequate, Colonel,” Attwood began before David cut him off.

“You don’t need to apologize to me. You need to apologize to the survivors of those camps. To the families whose loved ones were machine-gunned or gassed before being dumped into mass graves. I got off easy. They didn’t. How many did your government kill? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? Several hundred thousand?”

Attwood looked visibly ill and glanced away from David’s rage-flushed face.

“Don’t you dare look away from me, Mr. Attwood!” His eyes bored into the man sitting across from him. “How many?” David shouted at the top of his lungs.

“I don’t know. At least several hundred thousand.”

“And now what, you expect to just say sorry and keep on as the leader of your planet and continue your political career?”

“Not in the least,” Attwood replied, and for the first time, David saw a spark of something that looked like remorse behind his eyes. “I was weak, and I was a coward. I’m not the right person to lead Monrovia out of the abyss it’s in. I only hope to keep it functioning until we can find that person.”

David leaned back in his seat. “Go on.”

“The first thing we have to do, after closing the camps, of course, is to begin a wide-ranging investigation of how this occurred.”

“It occurred when your government decided that killing people who disagreed with others’ positions on matters of faith was a good idea,” David shot back.

“It didn’t start out here, Colonel,” Attwood said while shaking his head. “I never meant for this to happen. I don’t think any of us did. We took one step down the road, thinking if we just had a little more power, we could help our planet. Then we decided that joining the League was the way to ensure our continued existence with some level of autonomy. One step led to another, then to another. Each

compromise became easier, and when it finally came time to open up camps and round up our citizens… friends… families," his voice trailed off for a moment, and emotion overtook his face, "no one had the guts to say no. I will go to my grave regretting that I didn't stand up and say no, even though it would have meant my death."

Maybe he is ashamed. Hard to believe that he wouldn't be after being brought face to face with the reality of what his government did. "If you're looking for sympathy, you won't find it here."

"I'm not looking for your sympathy, Colonel. Just your help. As the ranking member of the Coalition Defense Force on this planet, I'd like you to get your government to send in a peace-keeping force as soon as possible. The Monrovian National Guard must be disbanded immediately, along with our paramilitary police units. Honestly, our entire law enforcement structure needs to be rebuilt from the ground up. Until we can do that, can the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense and the *Lion of Judah* stay on station?"

"I can't speak for the Mother Superior, but the *Lion* is unlikely to be able to stay long. There's a war to fight," David said, before glancing at Sarno. "What about the sisters?"

"I can keep our current forces on the planet until CDF reinforcements arrive, Colonel Cohen," the older nun replied in her normal taciturn tone.

"Thank you, Mother Superior," Attwood said. "Any assistance from the Terran Coalition would be welcome."

"What about the people who participated in the bloodshed? There must be justice," David interjected.

"I'd like an outside entity, perhaps a joint effort between the Terran Coalition and the Organization of Non-Aligned Planets, to investigate and bring charges against anyone who participated in, organized, carried out, or in any way

supported the actions of our recent government," Attwood replied.

"Does that include you?"

"As soon as I can identify a successor, yes, it does. I will plead guilty and accept whatever punishment is handed out."

David stared at Attwood for a moment, taking in his statement. "That's a start," he finally said. "I would expect this investigation to also look into terrorist activities by religious groups as well. General Monahan and those who planned and carried out suicide attacks that claimed innocent lives must face justice."

"I appreciate that sentiment, Colonel."

"I apply my ethics evenly in every way that I can, Mr. Attwood."

"It will be a very long road back for us to heal what's happened and make everyone on Monrovia believe in the rule of law and basic freedoms again," Attwood replied.

"I would think most of the people who were persecuted by your government will simply want to leave, no matter what you do," Sarno said. "I'm certain that the Terran Coalition will accept them, should they wish to apply for refugee status."

"Of course, Mother Superior. I will support whatever choice the citizens of our planet make. I want to make up for it all, somehow."

"You don't make up for this kind of heinous crime, Mr. Attwood," David replied through clenched teeth. "You can work the rest of your life, and it won't be enough."

"I am still going to try."

David painfully pushed himself up from the chair and looked down on Attwood. "You do that. I'll be in touch once I speak to my superiors."

"Of course, Colonel," Attwood said as he stood.

Sarno also rose and faced him. “Prime Minister, I will commend you for having the right words. I hope that in time, you have the right spirit as well. True forgiveness comes not from the rest of us, but God. Think about it.”

Attwood only nodded in reply as Sarno, David, and Calvin began to walk out, slowed by David’s painful gait with the cane.

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A FEW HOURS LATER, David returned to the *Lion of Judah*. Met by an honor guard led by Master Chief Tinetariro, he came back onboard to much fanfare. A visit to the medical ward, hot shower, and a good meal later, he found himself at least physically refreshed, and able to walk without the cane. After treatment, the physical therapist had given him a range of exercises. He was also told to visit the doctor daily to have additional procedures to his Achilles tendon to ensure it healed properly.

Finally, back behind his desk in the *Lion*'s CO's day cabin, he looked through his messages and the reams of digital paperwork that had piled up in his absence. One note stood out very boldly; an email from General MacIntosh with the subject line of "VIDLINK ME NOW."

I need to talk to him about sending additional troops to Monrovia for peacekeeping exercises anyway, so I'd better get this over with. David punched up the vidlink interface and sent a request to MacIntosh. The unsmiling face of General MacIntosh filled the screen on his table soon after. "Colonel Cohen. So nice of you to finally get in touch."

"I'm going to go with saying that's sarcasm, General."

"You're damned right it's sarcasm, Colonel."

“Sir, I—” David began before MacIntosh cut in.

“Stow it, Colonel.”

At the rebuke, David simply shut his mouth and sat back.

“What part of the word ‘orders’ do you not understand, son? I specifically ordered you to equip the nuns, send them on their way, and proceed at best speed to your next engagement. Instead… you turn in some bogus leave-of-absence paperwork. Several of your senior officers ended up with you on the planet, again in defiance of my orders, and you brought along a reporter!” MacIntosh yelled, then composed himself. “In what galaxy do you think you can just choose which orders you want to obey and which ones you don’t?”

“With respect, sir… I’m pretty sure that the Monrovian National Guard soldiers that participated in the religious cleansing of its citizenry will plead they were just following orders and that defense won’t be accepted.”

“Are you seriously trying to tell me that you equate executing civilians with joining an invasion of a planet?”

“What I am saying, sir, is that if one of those Monrovians had stood up and refused to go along, we would praise that man or woman as a hero. I stood up to help stop them. I have no regrets. You put me in this seat knowing that my methods are, well, unorthodox. If it costs me my career to know that millions of innocents are safe, so be it.”

“You and the president are two peas in the same damn pod,” MacIntosh groused. “I wish I had the benefit of being such a doe-eyed idealist, Colonel. But no, that’s not my job. My job is to make sure the Terran Coalition survives. Regardless of the cost, no matter what it takes. Since you’re on your moral high horse, how about we play a little game of what if. What if your unique tactical talents were needed in the battle you weren’t present for? What if Admiral Kartal needed your expertise? What if the League fleet he was

facing was stronger than expected? What then, Colonel! Going off half-cocked to save civilians on a planet that's not even in the Terran Coalition could have caused tens of thousands of CDF soldiers to pay the ultimate price!"

David wasn't entirely sure what to make of MacIntosh's behavior; this was the first time he'd been on the receiving end of his anger, that was for sure. "General—" he tried to say.

"I'm not finished yet, Colonel Cohen! This isn't a game. It's not an exercise. This war is the real thing, and it's for keeps. I was there at the first battle of Canaan. I saw how close of a thing it was. Too many good men and women paid the ultimate price to win that battle. The next time I give you a direct order, you will obey it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir," David replied, his jaw set and his face taut and angry.

"Now, what's the current situation?"

"The Monrovians have surrendered, sir. A few diehard zealots are holding out, but organized resistance is over. The sisters are mopping up."

"Good. Do you have proof that the League supplied them with arms?"

"Better than that, sir. Most of the advisors they sent along were captured alive. There's ample proof of the League's involvement all over the place in this mess. I expect the reporter you mentioned earlier to be broadcasting that all over the galaxy shortly."

MacIntosh's expression softened, just a hair. "Did they work you over too badly?"

"I'll survive, sir," David replied. "They used a pain chair on me... I'll need some physical therapy for a bit and treatments on my leg. All in all, not too bad."

"And mentally?"

“The idiot interrogating me actually thought he could shake my belief in God,” David said with a smirk. “That’ll be the day.”

“David, don’t think that I don’t respect your bravery or your drive to do what you think is right. But we’re in the military. You know that.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Well, sir… the interim prime minister has requested the Terran Coalition send peacekeeping forces to help them reform their police and military. He’s also requested our help in bringing everyone connected with the death camps to trial, and eventual membership in the Terran Coalition.”

MacIntosh let out a sigh. “More troops we don’t have. Our government already anticipated that course of action. Let them know we’ll send a hundred thousand military police and garrison troops. Can the sisters hold it together until they arrive?”

“I believe so, sir. They have things well in hand, and the planet’s population is quite frankly in shock. I don’t believe most people understood what was happening. Or maybe they didn’t want to understand. They’re being forced to confront reality now, and I think most people when they look into the abyss and see a reflection of themselves… it causes some serious soul searching.”

“From someone who’s looked into that abyss once or twice, I can tell you firsthand it does.”

“What are my orders, sir?”

“Prepare to return to Canaan. Your battle damage will be repaired, and fighter losses replaced. I will also debrief you and your senior crew in person. Do not expect that to be a positive experience, Colonel,” MacIntosh said, the hard edge to his voice returning.

“Yes, sir.”

“David, I need you to understand that, while I respect your abilities, I seek to make you a better officer. You should have gotten another eight years of seasoning in which you would have made Lieutenant Colonel, served as the XO of a capital ship, and returned to school for a degree in advanced tactics before you were ever considered for O-6. I’m trying to compress all of that into on-the-job training.”

“Do you lack confidence in me, sir?”

“No. Not at all. I have to tune you up and keep you from harming yourself or the Terran Coalition with ill-timed idealist stunts. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Get wrapped up and get back to the barn. Godspeed, Colonel. MacIntosh out.”

In the bowels of the *Lion of Judah*, Angie Dinman sat in her small production office reviewing dozens of hours of footage, interviews, and notes. She stared at the tablet in front of her, where she had tried several times to create an effective and compelling introduction to the story she had to file by the end of the afternoon. Trying again, she turned on the microphone to the recording program on her tablet.

“This is Angela Dinman for GNN, reporting from the CSV *Lion of Judah*. Over the last several days, I have been planetside on Monrovia, watching firsthand as the Little Sisters of Divine Recompense and several officers of the Coalition Defense Force attempted to stop the tragedy that was occurring on the surface. As a reporter, it’s my job not to become personally involved nor to draw any conclusions from a story that would influence my reporting. That job is to provide an impartial view of the facts and allow you, the viewers, to draw your own conclusions. For one of the first

times in my life, I have found it nearly impossible to accomplish that standard. I've seen things the last week I hope never to see again as long as I live. I've watched women, children, and men rescued from camps where they lived worse than animals, starving to death, lacking basic hygiene and medical attention. I also witnessed firsthand, the excavation of mass graves where thousands of people had been buried."

A tear slid down Angie's face as she continued to talk into the mic. "There are times when I believe that our military gets it wrong, and I'll report on those times fully and honestly, because all branches of our government must be held to account. That is the basis of a strong and free society. Here, though, to those who have argued the Monrovians weren't doing anything wrong, I challenge you to come here, see what I've seen, and make that same argument. As you will see with the firsthand images, analysis, and forensic reports I have amassed, what the government of this planet did was nothing short of the systematic attempt to kill every human being that believed in a higher power. Regardless of your belief set—which, for the record, I'm an agnostic—this behavior is disgusting. Make up your own mind, but this reporter will argue to anyone who will listen that the Terran Coalition didn't go far enough. Instead of looking away while a few brave soldiers stood up and joined with a group of nuns to try to save the innocent people in these camps, they should have sent everything they had to ensure a quick military victory. Up first is a series of holoprojections taken directly from the first camp that was liberated."

Angie switched off the mic and sat back in her chair. *That was the best take yet, though it still might be too personal. It'll work at least as a placeholder. Now let's slide in the drone footage from the overflight and see what happens.*

38

As part of the final transfer of arms and supplies to the nuns, David had traveled back down to the surface in a shuttle filled with munitions and food. General MacIntosh had authorized the transfer of what amounted to the *Lion*'s balance of stores for food, medical supplies, and arms to the Little Sisters with the proviso that they would be responsible for the next week or so for ensuring Monrovia avoided general unrest. Following up a request from Mother Superior Sarno, he had diverted to a detention center where many of the suspected war criminals from the Monrovian military were being housed, as well as General Monahan.

Finding himself in a visitation room, David waited for Monahan to be brought in; the general had so far refused to speak with anyone regarding who his accomplices and agents were. *I guess Mother Superior wants me to get that information out of him. Something tells me that he won't give it up quickly.*

The door swung open, and a single nun stood outside the door with Monahan, gesturing inside. He stepped into the room, and his face showed surprise at seeing David. "Colonel Cohen… you're back in uniform."

David grimaced slightly. "That I am, General."

“I wish my captors would use the same courtesy. I haven’t gotten a single ‘General, sir’ since I became a guest of this facility.”

“Would you care to sit down?” David asked.

Monahan eyed the table and its two chairs; sitting down across from David, he stretched his legs out, and the nun that had brought him to the room closed the door, leaving them alone.

“Now, Colonel… what can I do for you?”

“Mother Superior asked me to talk to you.”

“You mean she asked you to question me about my involvement in terrorist activities,” Monahan interjected.

“In so many words.”

“I’m not rolling on my men, Colonel.”

“They’re not your men any longer,” David observed.

“They’ll always be my men. We made a pack to defend our faith, our families, and those who couldn’t fight back from the butchers in the Monrovian government. Regardless of what it took, we’d make them pay.”

“By killing innocent civilians?”

“Innocent?” Monahan asked incredulously. “Do you think the people who voted to exterminate us are innocent? While I’m a Christian, I know the history of Jews, Colonel. I know what happened to your people back on Earth. If you had been alive during the Holocaust, would you have not tried to strike back?”

“Of course I would’ve tried to strike back,” David snapped.

“And you think you’d have taken out a few people that maybe didn’t deserve it? For that matter, are you seriously telling me that, in your career, you’ve never killed an innocent?”

David sat silent for several seconds. “No, I can’t say that, General. I’d like to believe, though, that I never targeted

innocents. I'd like to believe those deaths will stick with me and guide me to make better decisions."

"I played the hand I had. Bombings worked. We inflicted real pain."

"Don't you realize that by engaging in suicide bombings, you only made it easier to round up more people and execute them?"

"They would have done it anyway, Colonel. I evened up those scales. I might have even brought down the government if you guys hadn't shown up."

"And how many more would have died in the end?"

Monahan shrugged. "That's for God to sort out."

"No, it's up to us to do the right thing. Day in, day out."

"Maybe for you. For me… anything required to win is on the table. Victory at any cost."

How far would I go? *Could I face down defeat and opt to do the right thing overtaking more of the enemy down with me*? "I don't subscribe to that way of thinking, General. I remember the words of Marcus Aurelius. The best revenge is to be unlike them who you fight. When we stoop to the level of acting like our enemy, I believe we become our enemy. The only way to truly win is to win the moral battle within, as well as the physical battle."

"Colonel, I'm glad you haven't yet had to make that choice. Someday, you will. I'd be curious to know what your decision is on that day. For now, you can keep riding high on your smug morality."

"It would go easier on you if you would provide us with names of those who engaged in civilian bombings."

"I've got nothing to say on that matter. I won't give up those who served with me. I don't care what you do to me. Lock me up the rest of my life. I don't care."

David nodded. "Well, it'll be up a tribunal set up jointly between Monrovia, the Terran Coalition, and the

Organization of Non-Aligned Planets to determine what happens to you. And the rest of the war criminals here."

"Good old Attwood's idea of coming clean?"

"It was his idea, yes."

"I should've shot that coward when I had the chance."

"For what it's worth, General, I think he's sincere about wanting to make amends."

Monahan's eyes narrowed. "There is no way in heaven or hell to make amends for trying to wipe out millions of people in torture and gas chambers."

David cocked his head to one side. "That's perhaps one thing we do agree on, General." He stood up, glancing toward the door. "I'm afraid I have to be going. I'll let the guard know you're ready to go back to your cell."

"You do that, Colonel," Monahan replied, his voice hard.

David banged on the door and waited for it to open. *God, please don't let me end up like this man. That would be a fate worse than death.*

Amir jumped out of the all-terrain vehicle as it came to a stop, turning back to face the nun who had driven him to the flight line. "Thank you, Sister. I'm much obliged for your assistance."

"My pleasure," the younger woman said, flashing him a smile and hitting the accelerator. The vehicle took off, whisper quiet due to the electric engine.

Looking out across the flight line, eight SF-106 Phantoms remained out of the twelve they had initially given to the sisters. Almost all of them had battle damage, but Amir thought they sat there proudly, if a piece of equipment could remotely appear proud. He made his way over to the lead fighter and walked around it to find Arendse staring up into

one of the engines. "*Salaam ʻalaykum*, Sister Arendse," he said.

Arendse whirled around and smiled upon seeing Amir. "And also with you, Colonel Amir. I wasn't sure if I'd get to see you before the CDF shipped everyone out."

"Colonel Cohen is finishing up some business in the capital, as is Colonel Demood. I just wanted to come back and make sure you were okay."

"Worried about me?"

"It was a bit touch and go there, wouldn't you say?"

"Very. But God saw us through, that and some fancy flying. We're in your debt for teaching us how to utilize these fighters properly and for staying with us until the very end."

"Trust in Allah, and tie your camel to a tree," Amir said, recounting an Arab proverb.

Arendse laughed and smiled. "I like that one. I think I'll start using it too."

"What now?"

"We serve as peacekeepers until relief arrives. Mother Superior told us that the Terran Coalition has agreed to send troops, so we have to keep things together until they get here."

"I understand we'll be transferring more fighters to your order. You'll have twenty-four fully operational Phantoms once they get here."

"What about spare parts?"

"I'll make sure we send some of the more difficult to source parts over," Amir replied. "I'm going to try to get you a couple of simulator units with our more realistic training scenarios."

"Thank you."

"I have been in many squadrons, fought in many battles, and had the honor of serving with many fine pilots. I want you to know that among all of them, I've never seen more

courage, dedication, and honor than out of you and your sisters. There have been battles in the past where a few good people made an outsized difference in the outcome. This was one of those battles," Amir said earnestly. "You should be proud of your efforts and your sisters' efforts. I go back to the *Lion of Judah* inspired by your example."

Arendse turned away from him before turning back, a tear running down her face. "I can't stop thinking about the ones who didn't come back. We normally don't go into direct combat. Our largest space battle to date has been against low-rent space pirates that run away as soon as someone shoots back. I don't think I was emotionally prepared for what real combat is truly like. How do you do it week in, week out?"

"It is hard," Amir said. "It's difficult to make friends and gain meaningful emotional attachments because of the high loss rates pilots suffer. It's our job to go out and take the hits meant for the big ships. Still, I mourn every loss. You should too. Remember their sacrifice but continue the fight."

"Those are wise words."

"My wife told me that once. I never forgot it."

"Is your wife in the CDF too?"

"She was a fighter pilot for ten years. Our daughter is a pilot now too. The entire Amir family likes to ride fast and fly high," Amir said, grinning widely. "I'm so proud of my daughter. She's even better in the cockpit than I am."

"Don't you worry about her safety?"

"Now you sound like my wife," Amir joked. "Yes, I worry every day, and I look forward to getting the short vidlinks she sends me once a week. My heart stops for a moment after I hear of a battle her carrier was in. All that said, she's fighting for what's right. I am proud we raised children who value our freedoms and are willing to die to defend them."

"I'd like to meet your family someday."

“I’d be honored to have you in our home for a meal.”

“Deal. As soon as the war’s over.”

Amir smiled. “I’d better be getting back to Colonel Cohen’s shuttle. I don’t want him to leave without me,” he said, deflecting her comment.

“Godspeed, Hassan.”

“*Ila al-liqaa*,” Amir replied. “Until we meet again,” he finished, explaining the Arabic phrase he had used.

As David and his compatriots prepared to depart Monrovia for the last time—at least on this deployment—he found himself in the courtyard of what had been an abandoned Catholic church. The sisters had taken it over as their planetary HQ, something David found especially fitting. The final shipment of military hardware was delivered. An old Gladius-class destroyer, which ironically had been the same class of warship that his father flew into the side of Seville’s flagship so many years ago, was in route to the system to be handed over to Mother Superior Sarno.

“Colonel?” Simone asked as she walked out of the main sanctuary’s wide-open doors.

“Sister Darzi!”

“Simone is fine… I think we can be on a first-name basis after I hauled you out of prison.”

David cracked a smile in return. “Very well, Simone.”

“You wanted to see me? Mother Superior was asking all kinds of questions. She reminded me that I’ve got solemn vows in my future.”

“Yes, I wanted to thank you for saving my life,” David said, as what she said registered and his face turned red. “Sister, I would never in any way try to violate your vows…” As soon as he said it, a voice in the back of his head chimed

in, *It's not like she isn't incredibly attractive and you don't realize that.*

"I know," Simone cut in. "You're a good man, Colonel. I'm glad our paths crossed."

"No one is good…not even one."

"I wasn't aware that Jews quoted the Christian Bible."

David grinned. "The verse actually traces back to the Psalms…which is on my side of the Bible."

"Ah, I wasn't aware of that. How does a CDF colonel have the time to study the Bible?"

"Before I was an officer, before I joined the CDF… I wanted to be a rabbi. I spent many years studying the Torah and the wisdom of the rabbis who came before. To me, that's one of the neatest things about Judaism. The constant search and questioning of what God's told us. I loved nothing more than reading the Torah and asking the rabbis the toughest questions I could. But, somewhere along the way, I decided my calling was to be a soldier. Nearly twenty years later, here I am."

Simone adjusted her habit and smoothed the fabric down. "It must have been a difficult choice."

"It was. I still wonder sometimes if I made the right call. It's a shame there isn't a group of Jewish rabbis running around the universe doing good through combat."

Simone laughed. "Are you making fun of us, David?"

"Never. You, Mother Superior Sarno, Sister Kaufman… you've earned my respect and gratitude."

"Well, I can only speak for myself, but you and your crew earned mine too," Simone replied, pausing for a moment. "I've been thinking about leaving the order."

David stared at her closely. "Why?"

"Yes. I… I'm not sure I'm fit to remain after killing that man. Mother Superior has counseled me that it was an unavoidable consequence of war, and my actions were

justified before God. I just… when I close my eyes, I see him," Simone said, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. "How do I get past that?"

"You don't. When I close my eyes at night, I see the faces of those I've killed. Sometimes I look down at my hands, and I feel like no matter how much I wash them, the blood never comes off. There's a part of me that hates what I do, another part of me hates how well I do it, and yet another part is proud that I'm able to defeat the League because I believe the League is pure evil."

"That's quite a contradiction."

"Isn't it?" David said, agreeing with her.

"How do you reconcile it all?"

"I trust that God's got me in the right place. I believe I need to do what I'm good at to protect others. I try in some way to balance the scales, to leave situations better than I found them, take care of my crew, and bring them home alive. The rest is in the hands of God."

Simone was silent for a while as she stared out at the hills behind the church. "I think I should rejoin the CDF. Colonel Demood told me he'd sponsor me for OCS. He said the Marines needed more people like me that could confidently engage the enemy."

"Simone, while I can't disagree that you'd make a fine asset to the TCMC or the CDF… that's not where you need to be."

"How can you know that for sure?"

"I guess I can't be absolutely certain but let me try to explain. There's plenty of people like Cal and me. We're ready to do what needs to be done, including kill as many Leaguers as required to keep our nation safe. There're far too few people like you and your order. You and the rest of the sisters constantly put your own lives on the line in order not to kill others. I was astounded by the level of care you took,

even in the face of an enemy doing horrific things to its citizens. I think we could all learn something from the grace you displayed in even trying to save a man that killed one of your own in cold blood. In short, Sister… we need more people like you out there trying to save lives. I'm convinced you're where you belong and that you're doing God's work."

They stood there in silence for several minutes, Simone staring at a point far away; David quiet while she thought. Finally, she spoke. "Thank you, David. I needed to hear that."

"Anytime."

"What about you? What will you do now?"

David shrugged. "Back to the *Lion*. General MacIntosh ordered us back to Canaan, where I'm sure we'll receive new orders."

"Are you going to get in trouble?"

"I don't know. Also, don't think I care. My conscience is at peace, and I'm sure we were supposed to help here. If we hadn't, God only knows how bad the situation would have ended up being for the people on this planet."

"We did okay," Simone replied, grinning herself.

"I'd better head to the shuttle before everyone wonders where I ran off to."

"Take care of yourself out there," Simone replied.

"You too. As I told the Mother Superior, if you guys ever need something, you've got a marker with the Lion of Judah and me as long as I'm in command of her."

Before turning to go, David stepped closer and gave Simone a hug, which she returned.

"Despite Mother Superior's dry attitude, she has a great deal of respect for you. I'm sure we'd help someday in the future if we can."

David inclined his head in thanks before turning to leave. *I wonder if I'll ever meet them again. I hope someday after this*

bloody war is over, there will be time to visit old friends.

39

After a good night's sleep, David was rested and ready for morning watch on the *Lion*'s bridge. He exchanged salutes with the Marines on guard at the entrance to the cavernous bridge and combat information center as he walked in.

Tinetariro announced his presence as soon as he set foot on the deck plate. "Colonel on the bridge!"

The standing enlisted personnel, as well as officers, braced to attention and brought their hands to their brows in sharp salutes. David crisply returned them. "As you were, ladies and gentlemen."

As everyone returned to what they'd been doing, he strode forward to the CO's chair. "Lieutenant Jackson, I have the conn."

"Aye, sir. Colonel Cohen has the conn," the young lieutenant replied, standing.

David sat down, the change of watch being a ritual he had performed countless times. *Still, there's something special about this ship and having the privilege of commanding her.* Turning to Hammond, he asked, "Navigation, status?"

"Standard orbit, sir, engineering has certified the Lawrence drive as ready to jump."

"Very good. TAO, status?"

“All weapons systems in standby mode sir. We didn’t scratch the paint while you were gone, if that’s what you were wondering,” Ruth said as she cranked her head around, displaying a smile. “If I may, sir, good to have you back.”

“Does that mean you did not like having a Saurian in charge, Lieutenant?” Aibek’s voice boomed from behind them.

Ruth’s face turned red. “Uh, no, sir!”

David chuckled. “It’s nice to be back.”

Aibek sat down with a thud in the XO’s chair. “I was getting used to the big chair, Colonel. I’ll have to break this one in again.”

“Conn, TAO!” Ruth interjected, all business. “Detecting a Lawrence drive transit…new contact. Designated Sierra fifty-two, Gladius-class destroyer. IFF is not showing as CDF, sir.”

David exchanged a glance with Aibek. “‘That’s mighty odd.”

“Conn, communications. Incoming transmission from the new contact, sir. It’s Mother Superior Sarno for you,” Taylor said from his station.

“Put her on my viewer, Lieutenant.”

A moment later, Sarno’s face appeared on the screen above him. Wearing her robes and habit, she seemed to be taciturn as ever. “Greetings, Colonel Cohen.”

“Good day, Mother Superior,” David replied. “I see you’ve upgraded your ride.”

Aibek snickered, as did Ruth and Hammond, and even the ordinarily sour nun cracked a smile. “General MacIntosh kept up his end of the bargain. We have to engage in a complete refit of the ship, as it’s been in mothballs for fifteen years. But, once we’re done, our ability to project power, as the military would say… will be greatly enhanced.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Perhaps this isn’t the last time we’ll get to work together.”

“Perhaps not, Colonel Cohen. While not normally how we operate, I’m impressed by you and your fellows’ dedication. Please pass on my thanks to Colonel Demood, Colonel Amir, and Dr. Tural.”

“Of course, ma’am. Anything you need before we jump out?”

Sarno shook her head. “Be careful out there, Colonel. You have an incredible responsibility to do what’s right with your ship and crew. Be a force for good and an instrument of God’s will.”

“I’ll try to the best of my ability, Mother Superior.”

“Oh, one last thing. Have you seen the last report filed by GNN on our involvement in the Monrovia crisis?”

David shook his head. “No, ma’am, I haven’t had time to watch the news yet, though I did hear about her reporting.”

“Thank Ms. Dinman for me as well. Her appeal has caused us to receive more donations in the last twelve hours than we normally receive in three years.”

“That’s incredible,” David said, shocked.

“God works in mysterious ways at times.”

“Very true, Mother Superior.”

“I will bid you farewell, for now, Colonel. Godspeed and safe travels.”

“You as well, ma’am.”

David saw her reach down to cut off the communication but stop right before she pressed the button. Instead, she brought her hand up to her brow in a traditional CDF salute. Immediately, David’s right hand snapped up, crisply returning the salute. They both exchanged smiles before Sarno finally cut the commlink off. Filled with a sense of pride for a job well done, he turned to Aibek. “We did well here.”

“Yes, we did, sir.”

“Well, I think it’s time to go and face the music back home. Navigation, commence final charge-up sequence for the Lawrence drive.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Hammond said.

“TAO, secure all tactical systems, and confirm that our magnetic cannons are unloaded.”

Ruth looked down at her board, checking one last time for reporting back. “Conn, TAO… all tactical systems are powered down, magnetic cannons unloaded, and the energy weapons capacitor is completely discharged.”

“Conn, Navigation. Lawrence drive is fully charged, and we are ready to jump.”

“Navigation, commence jump to Canaan,” David ordered.

The *Lion of Judah*, in orbit high above Monrovia, turned and engaged her sub-light engines. At the same time, she powered up her massive Lawrence drive, and an artificial wormhole opened directly in front of the ship. It only took a few seconds for the vessel to glide into the construct of dizzying colors and disappear from local space. Shortly after that, the wormhole collapsed in on itself, and there was no trace of the mighty warship to be found.

A FEW HOURS after making orbit over Canaan and docking at the primary CDF space station, David and several of the senior officers, as well as Kenneth Lowe, the lead contractor, were in the main conference room. Priority notification had come in, indicating that General MacIntosh wanted to debrief them in person. *I’m wagering the general is still very unhappy. This ought to be…interesting.* Aibek, Calvin, Amir, Ruth, Kenneth, and Taylor were in attendance, based on the MacIntosh’s specific request.

“You got any idea why the shiny brass wants to see us, Colonel?” Calvin asked in a sarcastic tone. “Maybe the general wants me to spit shine his boots Marine Corps style.”

“I’m sure he’s learned more about what we collectively did on Monrovia and is less than pleased,” David said. “We did, after all, disobey direct orders.”

“They ought to give us a medal for disobeying those orders,” Ruth insisted.

As the officers talked, David noticed that Kenneth looked extremely uncomfortable.

“Orders are orders,” David said, his voice clear and direct. “If we start deciding which ones we choose to obey, the chain of command breaks down. This is the military, after all.”

“I’m glad someone still understands that, Colonel Cohen,” MacIntosh said in his loud, booming Scottish brogue as he walked into the conference room. Led by David, everyone jumped out of their chairs and came to attention. MacIntosh shut the hatch and turned around.

“I am singularly disappointed in the actions of the people in this room over the last five days,” MacIntosh began. “Lieutenant Goldberg, you encouraged superior officers to disobey direct orders… and worse than that, Colonel Aibek, you went along with her! What Colonel Cohen said is absolutely correct. This is the military. We don’t get to pick and choose. You do what you’re told, when you’re told, with a sharp salute and a clear, crisp ‘Aye aye, sir!’ Do you get me?” The last sentence was said at practically a shout.

“We get you, sir!” David replied, his voice loud.

“I don’t think you do, Colonel,” MacIntosh said, his face turning red. “If you did, you wouldn’t have disobeyed direct orders from me. Nor would you have kept from me just how far your crew went to intervene in the conflict!”

“With respect, sir…” David tried to interject.

“I’m not finished, Colonel!” MacIntosh barked. “Mr. Lowe, did you or did you not clandestinely provide information to the sisters against direct orders?”

Kenneth gulped before responding, “Uh, well, yes, sir.”

MacIntosh moved on to his next target, looking in Aibek’s direction. “Colonel Aibek, why did you order the *Lion of Judah* to engage targets on the ground of a neutral planet?”

Aibek looked between David and MacIntosh before speaking. “The targets in question were League of Sol military hardware, recently delivered to the Monrovians, sir. We used pin-point strikes to neutralize them. Without that action, it is my professional opinion that the enemy would have prevailed.”

“And what if your attacks had struck other targets? Caused collateral damage?”

“You mean killed civilians, sir?” David replied, causing MacIntosh to again turn to him. “Even if that had happened, it would have been better than allowing the Monrovian government to continue its religious cleansing! It was the right thing to do, sir.”

“The right thing to do… is that the standard these days?” MacIntosh replied, looking at Aibek. “I ought to have you removed from the exchange program for this stunt. You, of all people, Colonel Aibek, should understand the chain of command and how important it is to our objectives and structure,” he practically shouted.

“General MacIntosh,” David attempted to say.

“I said I’m not done, Colonel!”

“With respect, sir!” David shouted. “I will not stand here and allow the men and women who serve under me to be maligned further. If you’re mad at me for what I did, take it out on me alone. They did nothing wrong. Colonel Aibek’s actions are consistent with the finest traditions of the

Coalition Defense Force. I'll concede that the discussions on the bridge, as I've been briefed on them, were outside of normal protocol. I'll address it later with my crew, sir," he said with a hard edge. "You will respect that same chain of command, sir, and allow me to handle it in my way unless I'm being relieved of duty."

Quiet descended over the room, and David held his breath as MacIntosh stared at him. "Everyone but Colonel Cohen is dismissed," MacIntosh finally said. When the others didn't move, he barked, "Now!"

Aibek, Calvin, Ruth, Amir, Kenneth, and Taylor made a beeline for the hatch, keeping eyes front. Aibek reached it first. He opened it up, and they exited. Taylor was the last one out, and he triggered the closing mechanism, leaving the room silent once more.

"You've got a brass set, Colonel," MacIntosh said without preamble.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

"Taking out your frustration with me on my crew is unwarranted. If you want to relieve me or you want me to step down, say so," David replied, his voice tight. He stared directly into MacIntosh's eyes, refusing to break eye contact.

"I don't want to relieve you… I want you to follow orders and do your damned job."

"I do that, sir. My ship was where it needed to be, and I was able to help the situation on Monrovia."

"So all's well that ends well?"

David considered mentally what he was about to say. *The truth is, General MacIntosh is right. I did disobey orders; I might have put a cute bow on it, but I broke at least the spirit of what he told me, if not the letter. I need to concede the point to him, because he won't be satisfied until I do. I know him well enough now*. "General, you're right. I didn't do what you told me to

do. I had my reasons, and I believe it was the right thing to do. I apologize for the situation this put you into, and I apologize for not being honest in a direct manner. I should've vidlinked you and explained what I was doing."

"That's a start," MacIntosh replied, his face softening just a tad. "You've used up your one and only grace card with me, Colonel. You ever pull another stunt like this, and I'll cashier you out of the service. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir."

"David… you're the best ship driver I've seen in my career. Get your feces congealed, execute your orders, and finish off the League. That's what counts, period."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't seem convinced of that."

"It's not enough to defeat the League, sir. We have to prevent the spread of its ideology. The idea that the state is the end all, be all of society is what led to this predicament on Monrovia."

"That's not your job, son. The politicians decide what policy is, and they decide what we're going to do or not do. Not the military."

"I understand, sir."

"You just don't like it and think you know better, right?"

David couldn't help but smile. "Perhaps sometimes I do, sir."

"Yeah, I was that officer once, maybe years ago when I was younger and still had hair. You grow out of it. I need you to grow out of it right now. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be inserting an official letter of reprimand into your personnel file. If you keep your nose clean for the next year, it will be discarded," MacIntosh stated.

"I understand, sir," David replied, looking straight ahead.

“You’ll be at Canaan for a few days. Whatever repairs are needed will be made, and full stocks of supplies taken on. Then you’ll be joining back up with Admiral Kartal.”

“Yes, sir. More action against the League?”

“Correct. Our campaign objective is to remove the threat of offensive League battlegroups from our local area of space. While many of them have been destroyed, there are a few fleets in being that remain dangerous. We’re not going to worry about planets held by the League right now. Our focus is exclusively on space-based forces. Ground troops will come in and mop up resistance once we’ve starved them from space.”

“In other words, we’re using blitzkrieg-style tactics,” David said.

“Blitzkrieg?”

“German term for early tank warfare. It means ‘lightning war.’ They left strongpoints of defense behind for infantry to destroy while the tanks pressed on and took more ground. That’s what you’re proposing, effectively.”

“Admiral Kartal is the one who came up with the strategy, son. I build new ships and oversee our special projects.”

“And handle me?”

For the first time, MacIntosh cracked a smile. “That too. I hope you understand that I’m hard on you because I see the potential in you.”

“I’ll try to remember that, sir.”

“You do that. I’ll see myself out. You’re dismissed.”

40

LATER THAT DAY, after MacIntosh was off the ship and everything had settled down, David took an early dinner in his quarters; he planned to go to sleep early and get a head start on the next day. His mind raced at a hundred miles an hour about the events of the last week, however, and sleep escaped him. He kept coming back to the risk and sacrifice that Aibek had made on his and the sisters' behalf. Resolving to have a conversation about it, he tossed his uniform back on and left his quarters. A few minutes later, he found himself pressing the buzzer to the XO's quarters, which were on the other side of officers' country. A continuity of operations precaution, CDF ship designers always put the CO and XO on opposite ends so that a single lucky shot wouldn't kill both of them at the same time.

"Come in," Aibek's deep voice said, issuing from a speaker on the wall.

The hatch automatically unlocked with a noticeable metallic sound, and David pushed it inward. The sight of Aibek's quarters greeted him; a place he hadn't been before. It departed from CDF standard with displays of trinkets and items from Sauria; specifically of a painting of the Saurian homeworld before it became a polluted mess. Ceremonial

weapons including an ax and two daggers graced the walls as well.

“Colonel, I apologize. I wasn’t expecting visitors,” Aibek said while gesturing to the room, which was generally messy.

“For some reason, I had this picture in my mind that everything in a Saurian’s quarters had a place, and everything was in its place.”

Aibek cocked his head to the right. “Why?”

David grinned. “Because your mass transit runs on time.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“It’s a human saying. We joke that the Germans always have trains which run on time.”

“You’ll have to explain that to me sometime.”

“Someday,” David said. “Got a few minutes to talk?”

“Of course, sir.” Aibek shoved a tablet and some printouts off his couch, making space for David to sit.

David sat down on the couch while Aibek took a seat in the large chair next to it. “Thank you, Talgat,” he said, testing out the use of his first name. “Is that the right pronunciation?”

“Well, my full name is S’aartan Talgat Aibek. But practically every Saurian in the universe has a first name that begins with S. I like to be different. So I use my middle name.”

“I can understand that. I like to be different too,” David said, cracking a smile. “The last couple of months, we haven’t had an excessive amount of time to get to know each other.”

“What is there to get to know? You’re a competent commanding officer and a fine warrior. I am assigned to your ship, and I will serve to the best of my ability.”

“I appreciate that sentiment, but humans typically go a bit deeper than that in our interactions,” David observed.

“Especially when we do things that put our careers and ambitions at risk.”

“You mean me breaking orders?”

“Exactly.”

Aibek looked at David square in the eyes. “David,” he replied, also testing out the use of his first name. “I could not simply step aside and do nothing. Honor demanded I try to help. To leave another to fight a noble fight, when I could intervene and help? That goes against everything I’ve ever learned and against my religious beliefs.”

“I find it somewhat interesting that your messiah figure was much more of a fighter than the messiah of the Christians,” David said.

“I’ve come to believe they’re one and the same.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. I’ve read the Christian Bible, and I find the similarities to be remarkable.”

“I’d point out that Jesus went around talking about doing good to those that hurt you, and turning the other cheek,” David replied.

“I thought Jews rejected him as the Messiah. If so, why do you know so much about him?”

David grinned. “Sheila was a born-again Christian. She and I had many a debate about the subject,” David said as he shrugged. “Jesus was a great man. He changed the course of the world. But as a Jew, I don’t believe that our Messiah has come in this universe as of yet.”

Aibek inclined his head. “I, of course, respect your belief. I would point out to you though, that Jesus used a whip on money chargers that stole from the poor. Clearly, he was capable of violence.”

“Perhaps. But that’s nowhere near the gist of his message.”

“No. For us, it was a large component. Perhaps God tailors his message to each race, dependent on how we evolve?” Aibek mused out loud.

“It’s certainly possible, even plausible.”

“Yet some do not yet believe.”

“Well, a skeptic would say that just because similar religions develop on different planets and with different species, it’s not a proof of God, but a disproof. In other words, religion is just something that societies generally come up with to keep everyone together and focused.”

“What about the idea that our brains appear to be hardwired to believe in a higher power?” Aibek responded.

“Same difference. That could be an evolved behavior.”

“Or concrete proof of a higher power.”

David smiled. “That’s what I think it is, but the other side has a counterpoint to every point we have. As we have one to each of their objections. The truth is, we can’t use science to prove or disprove the existence of God. It’s something that one must take on faith.”

“Faith is powerful.”

“Yes, it is,” David said in agreement. “Thank you for helping us. I’m sorry that it came to General MacIntosh threatening to end your participating in the exchange program.”

Aibek shrugged. “My only regret would have been that I was unable to continue serving with you and the other warriors on this ship. I have come to respect all of you a great deal. I hope to continue to be useful and serve faithfully.”

“I’m certain that will continue to be the case,” David replied. “What do Saurians like to do for fun anyway?”

“What is fun?” Aibek asked in a perfect deadpan.

“Hah. Almost had me there. There’s got to be some hobby or activity you like to do.”

“Most of our culture is steeped in some form of fighting. I do enjoy what you would call martial arts and some sports activities.”

“Ever tried bowling?”

“Bowling?” Aibek asked, making a quirked face.

“You roll a ball down a wood surface and try to knock over plastic pins,” David explained.

“That sounds… boring.”

“It can be, but it’s somewhat relaxing to me. Would you care to join me tomorrow? Goldberg, Taylor, and Amir enjoy playing. I’ll get them all to come along.”

“I’ll try just about anything once,” Aibek responded.

“Good. 1900 CMT? Right after dinner?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Excellent! Now I’m going to go get some sleep,” David said as he stood from the couch, a grin spreading across his face.

“Good night, David. Godspeed and good rest,” Aibek replied.

As David stepped through the hatch and back into the passageway that lay beyond, he looked back into the room. “For what it’s worth, you’re every bit Sheila’s equal in terms of ability, honor, and dedication, Talgat. I’m glad we’re serving together.”

“I am honored.”

David inclined his head and walked off down the hall. *It’s going to take a lot of time before I have the kind of natural rapport with Aibek that I had with Shelia, even after taking the emotional element out of it. She could read my mind. Still, I’m lucky to have him. I need to nurture our friendship on and off the ship. I’ll have to put myself outside of my comfort zone and do it.*

As he stepped into the gravlift and began to order it to take him to the deck his cabin was situated on, David thought the better of it. “Deck five,” he said instead. A brief

ride later, the doors slid open, and David briskly walked down the central passageway of the ship. As large as three normal passageways, it was one of the main thoroughfares for the crew. His destination was the shul, which was amidships, situated against the outer hull.

At the late hour, there was virtually no one present in the shul, David noticed as he pulled on his yarmulke and walked inside. "Prayers before bed, Colonel Cohen?" the voice of Rabbi Kravitz boomed out from his small office.

Smiling, David stuck his head through the door. "Still got a few minutes for a fellow Jew, Rabbi?"

"Of course. Come in. Come in!" Kravitz replied, wearing a warm and genuine smile himself.

"I haven't had time to get down here and thank you for ministering to those we rescued. I'm sure that having a rabbi around to offer healing was beneficial," David said.

"The Mitzvot do specifically say to appoint a special priest for soldiers in a war."

"Five hundred ninety-nine," David replied with a grin.

"Do you still study the Torah?" Kravitz asked.

David nodded. "Every day that I can. I still hope someday to become a rabbi."

"A noble goal," Kravitz replied. "We always need more of those."

"I read somewhere the other day that there are more than a billion Jews in the Terran Coalition as of the last census."

"We were fruitful and multiplied," Kravitz cracked.

"I'll say. We're still the smallest of the major religions."

"That would be expected. We started with far fewer people in the Exodus," Kravitz observed.

"I'm worried, Rabbi."

"About what?"

"I didn't even remember that it was Rosh Hashanah. I was so caught up in fighting and what was going on around

me. I find that I'm struggling to fulfill my duties as a Jew."

"Then rededicate yourself, decide to pray more, partake in services, and worship God."

"Do you ever wonder how Adonai looks at us? I imagine He must be disgusted when we engage in combat, killing dozens, hundreds, thousands of His creations, and show up to prayers a few hours later."

"I don't believe he judges us for a just action in war," Kravitz said, frowning. "If I may be so bold, it sounds to me like that you carry around much guilt."

"I do," David replied. "I feel like I'm constantly running from the guilt and despair that threatens to engulf me. I still blame myself for Sheila's death. If I hadn't insisted on going after Seville, she'd still be alive."

"And we probably wouldn't have the allies we have now, nor be pushing the League back across the entire front."

"So her death was God's plan? It was worth it in the grand scheme of things?"

"Perhaps it was," Kravitz allowed.

"Someday, I want to understand why. A being that can create anything, why can't He stop the League in its tracks? Why not banish evil?"

"Have you considered that perhaps God doesn't revolve around you or me? That, in fact, we revolve around Him? Perhaps the reason Adonai doesn't destroy evil in the universe today is that if He did, billions of souls who do not know Him would be cast out. Perhaps He, in His infinite wisdom, allows us to grope around and try to seek His name."

David furrowed his brow while shaking his head. "I suppose I hadn't thought of it in that manner. At least not recently."

"Think on it."

“I still hate this war,” David said as he sighed. “I long for the day we no longer have to fight day in and day out to ensure our existence.”

“Only a sociopath enjoys killing,” Kravitz replied. “The fact it still bothers you is proof you haven’t lost your humanity and your connection to God.”

“Thanks, Rabbi.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

David stood up. “I guess I’d better recite the evening prayer and turn in. Tomorrow is another day.”

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

“I’ll do my best,” David replied, smiling.

Andrew MacIntosh walked through a full-body scanning booth at one of the entrances to the residence of the Terran Coalition’s president in his full uniform. The protocol called for wearing, at a minimum, service dress khaki uniforms to meet with the president, preferably dress blacks, which MacIntosh didn’t have time to don.

After completing the scan, he was whisked away to the private living quarters by several elite protective service agents and directed to wait in one of the many and ornately decorated rooms. This particular room was decorated in a Greco-Roman style with paintings of Dr. James Lawrence, the creator of the FTL system employed by all human spacecraft, adorning the walls. MacIntosh didn’t have to wait long; within five minutes, the door swung open, and President Spencer entered, followed by his constant, twenty-four-hours-a-day bodyguard.

Reflexively, MacIntosh sprang from his chair and came to attention. “At ease, Andrew,” Spencer said with a smile.

“This is just a friendly discussion between two friends.”

MacIntosh relaxed into a parade rest posture. “Sir, you’re the President of the Terran Coalition. Can’t train that out of this old soldier.”

Spencer gestured to the chair MacIntosh had been occupying. “Please, have a seat,” he said as he sat down on the couch across from the chair.

“Thank you, sir,” MacIntosh replied, sitting only after the president had.

“We’re preparing a statement on the Monrovia situation, and I wanted your thoughts on the matter,” Spencer stated matter-of-factly.

“Mr. President, while I argued for intervention, the situation ended up going further than I had ever intended. I can do nothing but offer my apologies for my personnel exceeding their authority and orders.”

“Andrew, I’m not upset about it. If anything, I’m grateful they did.”

MacIntosh’s mouth dropped open. “With respect, sir, we operate on a system of orders. If you don’t like orders, you have to shut up and do them or resign. There’s no cherry-picking which ones you agree to follow.”

“You did tell me that Colonel Cohen was unorthodox in his methods.”

“I underestimated just how unorthodox he is, sir,” MacIntosh replied.

“I think that might be a positive. Thanks to the reporting done on Monrovia, the approval rating for the CDF is even higher than it was a couple of weeks ago, which was a historical high then. Spontaneous gatherings are occurring outside of our embassies on neutral planets thanking the Terran Coalition for protecting them. In short, we’ve come out of this as the force for good in our local region. I can’t see a better outcome. We stopped a monstrous wrong,

exposed the League one more time for what it is, and did it in front of a holocamera for once. How many times have our men and women died to stop the League, and the press never seemed to notice just how bad the League is?"

"That may be true, sir. I worry about the optics of the Terran Coalition intervening in other planets' internal business. This case was easy, but what about the next one? It's a slippery slope to imperialism setting in."

"I'm surprised to hear this from the man who wanted me to authorize intervention in the first place."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions, sir. History shows that unchecked police actions against rogue states feed on themselves. I urge caution."

"I think you're more chafed at your protégé disregarding your instructions," Spencer observed.

"The young colonel still has a lot to learn," MacIntosh replied, smiling ruefully. "I wish he had more seasoning, but I still believe he's the best man for the job."

"I seem to remember you overlooking a certain CDF officer exceeding his orders on occasion."

"And he grew up to be the commander in chief. Can't have that happen again, sir," MacIntosh said with a tight grin.

"There's something I want to know."

"What's that, sir?"

"How'd you managed to get a seemingly unbiased GNN reporter onto the *Lion of Judah*? I never quite understood why you argued for them over a Canaan News Network embed."

"Well, sir, everyone expects Canaan News to be pro-CDF. I thought it would be far better for our society and for morale at large to have a reporter from a news outlet that wasn't thought of generally pro-military. You can argue pretty convincingly that GNN is anti-CDF." *Better to leave the rest of my deal off the record.*

Spencer nodded his understanding. “I see, Andrew. Your line of reasoning is, as usual, impeccable. I’d also like to thank you for finding the troops to get Monrovia garrisoned. I’m sure that was no easy feat.”

“I bled forces off from several of our core worlds that, quite frankly, don’t need as many troops right now thanks to our continued successes in the war, and cobbled together a few reserve ships to constitute a planetary defense and customs force. Monrovia is a long way from being stabilized, though. The people of the planet are experiencing great upheaval. In the end, it’ll be up to them what kind of society they create from the ashes.”

“It’s up to each of us, in the end, to do what’s right,” Spencer observed. “I find myself thinking we should have done more here. It was only the heroic actions of a few brave people that saved the day. Perhaps, when the League is finally on the run, we should change policy.”

“To confronting evil in our local area of the galaxy?”

“Yes. We’ve long ignored things in our backyard, sticking to this non-interference mantra. For instance, take the Harr’al. They allow legalized slavery for crying out loud, Andrew. Humans fought wars that killed millions of people to stop slavery back on Earth. Someday, I hope we can right some wrongs out here. It’s about time.”

“Mr. President, again, as a professional military officer, I would caution you to avoid blanket statements. They lead to unintended consequences.”

“I’ll try to remember that in the days ahead.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Andrew, I’m going to go have dinner with my wife and children. Would you care to join us?”

MacIntosh shook his head. “No, sir, though I am deeply honored you would ask. If I did that without bringing my wife, well, she’d kill me.”

“Then I’ll invite both of you soon,” Spencer replied while laughing and rising from his seat on the couch.

MacIntosh quickly jumped out of the chair and stood as well. “Thank you, sir.”

“Carry on, Andrew, and keep those technological marvels coming.”

“Aye aye, sir!”

Spencer walked out of the room, followed by his two protectors, leaving MacIntosh to exit the residence. During his trip out, he couldn’t help but think about the conversation. *I know where Justin’s heart is, but we can’t be the galaxy’s policeman right now. Even once we beat the League, we need to step back, take care of our own, rebuild our civil infrastructure, and for the first time in a generation, not be at war. At least, that’s how I see it. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter what I believe because the politicians make policy, not the military. I hope whoever our next president is, has the same kind of abilities and coolness under fire that Justin does. Otherwise, we could find ourselves in many small wars… and that’s not something I look forward to.*

41

The day after returning to Canaan, David rose at his usual time of 0430 CMT. *Maybe there's a bit more spring in my step today*, he reflected after exiting the officer's gym after his workout. *There's got to be. I can't be getting old before I even turn forty*. He made his way back to his quarters, showered, and dressed in the uniform of the day. Deciding to eat before his morning prayers, David arrived at his favorite officers' mess at 0530. For reasons he couldn't readily explain, the one closest to the bridge had become the one he preferred, even though there were three others on the massive ship available for officers at all hours, in addition to six messes for enlisted personnel. Walking in the door, he strolled into the ordering area.

"Chief," David said, addressing the lead cook. "Give me three eggs over medium with a side of hash browns and toast. Oh, and get me a piece of salmon too, if you have one that's kosher still in stock?"

"Yes, sir, Colonel! You're in luck; we resupplied last night. I've even got some eggs that are marked kosher, though… well, sir, we do cook meat on this grill too."

David grinned in return. "I know, Chief. Hard to get an actual kosher meal except when it's brought up pre-cooked.

We're out of the vacuum-sealed religious meals anyway."

"I heard the chiefs' mess still has some of those, sir."

"I guess I'd better see if I can get the Master Chief to invite me sometime," David replied. "You guys always get the best food."

"Been that way for hundreds of years too, sir," the head chef, who wore the stripes of a chief petty officer, replied.

"I'll have to settle for things marked 'kosher' this time around, Chief. Serve it up!"

"Oh great, here we go with that again. Kosher this, kosher that. Next, you're going to tell me I can't have my bacon cheeseburgers," boomed Calvin's voice from behind both of them. David turned around and made a big show of rolling his eyes.

"Colonel Demood… I'm tempted to make you run laps in here," David replied good-naturedly.

"I'm game. Like to see you CDF boys keep up with my laps any day of the week. Chief, let me have my usual. Two eggs, bacon and sausage, peanut butter on the toast."

"You got it, Colonel," the chef replied.

"Chief, please use a separate pan for the bacon," David said with a grin.

"Already planned on it, sir."

Turning to Calvin, David continued, "Care to join for me for breakfast?"

"Sure. You get a good night's sleep?"

"Yeah, about as good as any lately," David replied as he walked over to the coffee dispenser and poured himself a mug. "Mmmmm. CDF coffee. Nothing else like it. I'll take this stuff over the lattes or whatever is in vogue with the more refined set these days."

"Hah, it's battery acid, but it does get us moving."

"Amen," David said, taking a seat at a table near the transparent metal "windows" that allowed a view of Canaan

and her orbiting defenses, space stations, and dozens of ships. “That is a sight that just never gets old to me,” he said while glancing out into space. “The fact that we’re out here and able to see the handiwork of the Creator. It’s a gift.”

Calvin took a sip of his coffee before speaking. “I’m kind of amazed we survived long enough as a species to get out in the stars.”

“You and me both.”

Out of the corner of his eye, David saw Ruth and Hanson come in about roughly the same time, place their orders, and get coffee. He waved at them, and both walked over.

“Mind if we join you, sir?” Ruth asked.

“Feel free.”

Ruth slid into the open seat next to David while Hanson occupied the one across from her. “I know it’s only been a couple of days, sir… but it feels like months,” Hanson commented. “Are you glad to be back?”

“You have no idea, Major. I’m very thankful to be back home, where I thankfully still belong.”

“Thank you for sticking up for us yesterday, sir,” Ruth said. “I think I can speak for the entire senior staff by saying that meant a lot.”

“Just something a good leader taught me, that I try imperfectly to emulate.”

“You emulate it well, then,” Ruth replied.

“Oh, look here. Colonel Cohen has a fan club. Where can I sign up? Does it come with autographs?” Calvin interjected sarcastically, causing laughter from everyone at the table.

“We’ve got another set of software upgrades for the reactor controls, courtesy of Dr. Hayworth,” Hanson said excitedly.

“How much of an improvement in power output?” David asked.

“Don’t feed the nerd, Colonel,” Calvin joked. “He’s bad enough without being encouraged.”

Hanson looked uncomfortable but pressed on. “Well, sir, at least five percent. Maybe eight if we keep pushing. It’d help keep our shields up longer or provide a bit more into the energy weapons capacitor.”

“That sounds good to me. More protection or more lethality… I’ll take both,” David replied.

Engrossed in the conversation, David didn’t see Amir walk up to the table. “Is there room for another?” he asked, holding a cup of hot tea.

“Of course, take a seat,” David said, gesturing to the open seat next to Calvin.

Amir set his tea down first, then pulled the chair out and sat down. “Thank you, sir.”

David leaned back in his seat, looking at his friends. “One more successful mission in the books, lady, and gents.”

“And a stark reminder of how far we’ve yet to go,” Amir replied. “I never thought I’d see human beings—outside of the League—do the kinds of things we saw on Monrovia.”

“Most of us are bad,” Calvin observed. “It shouldn’t be a surprise that when push comes to shove, most will try to save their skins by any means necessary.”

Ruth shook her head. “I can’t agree with that. I believe, at our core, most people want to do good. Sometimes we need a push.”

“A still, small voice?” David asked with a smile.

“Something like that.”

“This coming from the one person at this table I would expect to think like me,” Calvin replied.

“Just because I like blasting Leaguers out of space doesn’t mean I think most humans are evil,” Ruth retorted.

“Speaking of blasting the League… when are we getting back in action, Colonel?” Calvin said.

“I expect us to get orders soon back to the front. Reloading munitions, stores, and supplies right now. Then we get back to it.”

Several mess stewards made a beeline for the table, carrying the food they’d ordered. “Thank you,” David said as his plate was placed in front of him. The rest of them politely thanked the men for bringing their food as well.

“Shall we pray?” David asked.

They all nodded and held out hands. David took Ruth’s and Calvin’s hands before bowing his head. “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth. Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, through Whose word everything comes into being. Amen.”

“Amen and pass the salt,” Calvin said.

“Amin,” Amir replied, putting stress on the I; it was the traditional Islamic version of amen used by Christians and Jews.

David took his fork and dug into the hash browns, taking a large bite. “Mmmmm,” he said between chews. After swallowing, he continued, “When you’re reduced to combat rations for a few days, real food just tastes incredible.”

“Especially combat rations prepared by nuns. They’re even more bland and tasteless than normal. I can’t explain it,” Calvin said with a laugh.

Ruth snickered as she took a bite of her eggs. “Getting soft, Colonel?”

“Marines don’t get soft. Ever. We’re called leathernecks for a reason.”

“Really, because I heard that a certain communications officer put you on the ground in a sparring match,” Ruth said while batting her eyelashes and making a comically innocent face.

“I put him on the ground with pugil sticks!” Calvin shot back.

“Oooo, bad look, Colonel. Don’t make a big deal out of it; that only confirms the joke got under your skin,” David replied.

“That’s not how I heard it,” Ruth continued. “Then again, maybe the well-dressed guards for the ship are getting soft across the board.”

“Just ask the League if we’re getting soft,” Calvin groused.

“Now, now,” David interjected. “We’re all friends here.”

“Marines, soldiers, and pilots have been jaw-jacking on each other since the beginning of the military,” Amir said, entering the fray. “I think most of you owe your continued success to pilots. We screen the capital ships and make sure the Marines get to where they're going while providing fire support.”

“One team, one mission, one fight?” Hanson said hopefully.

“Exactly, Major,” David said pointedly.

“Agreed,” Calvin said, downing a swig of coffee. “It’s time for us to keep striking back. Where’s our resident Saurian anyway? I needed to congratulate him on how our new allies are kicking butt and taking names.”

“Colonel Aibek is standing watch currently,” Hanson said. “I just finished giving him my engineering readiness report before hitting the breakfast tour.”

“The tour?” David asked.

“Yeah, you get breakfast in this mess, and the one close to engineering has delicious pastries,” Hanson explained. “I grabbed one on my way back to the reactor chamber.”

Calvin stared at Hanson, his jaw dropping open. “That’s why we’ve got Marines onboard. Without them, the ship

would be defended by soldiers who have breakfast and then an extra pastry. Keep exercising!"

"You guys keep this up, I'm going to hold a ship-wide PT contest between the different departments, pilots, and Marines. Whoever loses will get to swab the deck," David replied in a tone of voice that indicated he was joking.

"Swab the deck, sir?" Amir asked with a look of bewilderment on his face.

"Back in the ancient days, when ships were made from wood, and men from iron… sailors had to swab down the deck every morning to clean it and keep the salt and seaweed down," David explained. "It wasn't fun duty and could be used as a punishment." An evil little grin popped onto his face. "Whoever loses could get out on the hull and clean it. Take us, what, two days?"

"On second thought, I love the Marines," Ruth quipped.

"Pilots are just awesome," Calvin piped up.

"Excellent," David said, still wearing the grin. He set his coffee mug down and made eye contact with Hanson. "I want you all to know that it's an honor to be able to serve with you. I couldn't ask for anything more out of this team," he said while making eye contact with each person at the table as he spoke.

"Thank you, sir. Glad to be onboard," Calvin replied.

"Same here, sir," Ruth said.

"I am thankful that the will of Allah brought us all together," Amir observed.

"Slight topic change. I've decided on a motto for the ship," David said. "*Semper Anticus*."

"Always forward?" Hanson said with a bit of hesitation in his voice.

"Almost. The direct translation is 'always at the front,'" David answered. "I found it to be fitting, especially in this

season of actual advance. Ball caps will also be ordered and should be here in a few weeks."

Ruth rolled her eyes. "No matter what cover we have to wear on the bridge, they all look awful."

"The point is, you all look the same," Calvin said. "Misery loves company."

"Will we be painting the motto of the ship down the main gangway on deck five?" Hanson asked, steering the subject elsewhere.

"That's the plan," David said. "It'll look sharp when we're done with it." Looking down at his finished plate, David knew it was time to get to prayers. "Okay, folks, time for me to roll out. See you all on the bridge at 0730?" He stood as they all acknowledged his statement and flashed a final smile. "Carry on!"

David turned and walked smartly out of the mess, glancing down at the commlink on his wrist to see he had just enough time to get to the shul. As he stepped into the gravlift to get down three decks, Angie ducked in before the doors could close. "Have a moment, Colonel?"

"Of course," David replied as he held the door. "I've meant to thank you for the reporting on Monrovia."

"It's caused quite a stir, hasn't it?"

"To put it mildly. I have you to thank for the stationing of CDF forces there and bringing some amount of normalcy and hope for the future to those people."

Angie grinned. "Don't get used to it, Colonel."

"Oh, I have no doubt you'll continue to hold our feet to the fire, as you've put it before."

"That's my job. Hold the powerful to account."

David laughed. "You think I'm powerful?"

"You command the most destructive warship in the CDF arsenal. Pretty powerful if you ask me."

“I carry out my orders just like every other officer and enlisted soldier.”

“Except when you don’t,” Angie said sharply.

“I don’t think I’ll get that opportunity too many more times,” David observed. “This one almost cost me my command.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not in the slightest. I’d regret it if I didn't stand up.” *Like I do for all the things I haven’t stood up for and for all the sins I’ve committed.*

“Well, thank you for taking me along. I’m glad I was able to bring that story to the galaxy at large. It needed to be told.”

The gravlift doors opened as it came to a stop. “No problem, Ms. Dinman,” David said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m late for the shul.”

“Of course, Colonel. It’s Angie, by the way.”

“We’re back to first names?”

“Yes,” Angie replied coolly.

“In that case, good day then… Angie,” David said, flashing a smile and walking out of the lift.

“Good day, David!” Angie called after him.

“THIS BRANDY IS INCREDIBLE,” Colonel Strappi, political commissar and morale for the LSS *Annihilator* said in a smug tone. “Thank you for allowing me to share in it, Admiral,” he said to Admiral Pierre Seville, her commanding officer and overall commander for the League forces operating in Canaan. They were seated in the drawing room of Seville’s expansive quarters onboard the ship. The quarters were like a small house with every possible luxury.

“Isn’t it?” Seville said. “I do appreciate the finer things at times. I suppose some nice liquor stocks are to be expected with us in orbit of Earth, our crown jewel.”

“Thank you for inviting me to enjoy it with you, Admiral.”

Always the sniveling little man. “Have you seen the latest intelligence report on Monrovia?”

“Yes, Admiral. Such a waste. We almost had a friendly planet to stage covert and overt actions against the Terran Coalition from a mere stone’s throw from their border.”

“It’s proof that the state cannot let any citizen in it have any duty, responsibility, or belief in a power higher than the state. The state is… everything,” Seville declared.

“I could not agree more, Admiral.”

“Unfortunately, the Monrovians were unable to fully grasp that and implement it before the Terran Coalition found out.”

“They will all feel the embrace of the League, Admiral. We must have faith and keep pushing forward.”

“Are you reading the same battle reports I am, Colonel Strappi?”

“We have had…setbacks.”

Seville laughed. “I see you’re back into your groove as our morale officer. A setback would be losing two battlegroups in a year. A setback would be one fleet carrier heavily damaged. In the last four weeks, we’ve lost two fleet carriers, four battlegroups, and enough ships to create an entirely new fleet. That’s not a setback; it’s an outright disaster!”

Strappi looked to Seville. He was like a man cornered; not willing to voice an opinion either way, he merely sat mute. “I know, we can’t say such things. It doesn’t matter, Colonel; it’s still true.”

“And? Do you have a plan to stop it?”

“Bleed the Terrans and the Saurians dry, trade space for time, and counterpunch once we’ve hurt them enough to make it count.”

“Will we get enough ships?” Strappi asked.

“Eventually. Chairman Palis keeps promising more. I’ve got another surprise coming. The key will be deploying all of it at the right time.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Oh, keep up the morale, Colonel,” Seville retorted, taking another sip of his brandy. “We look bad to people who don’t understand what the state embodies on the galactic stage right now. In the end, it simply doesn’t matter. Let the neutral planets flock to the Terran Coalition. We’ll grind them all under our feet. And someday… you and I will show them what it looks like to successfully reeducate a population. The Monrovians used half measures and tried to build in—how did they put it—safeguards? The League knows that to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs. All for the glory of the state!”

“For the state, Admiral!” Strappi replied, lifting his drink in salute.

Just like a small dog to be led around. Seville smiled at the thought. Soon this season of defeat would be at an end, and the Terran Coalition would rue the day it was founded. He longed for that day. Once it came, he’d finally be able to take control of the League and turn it into the empire it should have been from the beginning.

THE END

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As I have with my previous works, I continue to thank God for giving me the ability to write and bring this story to life. I hope everyone enjoys reading it, as much as I've enjoyed writing it.